

MAKE IT SO 12



*a
Star Trek
fanzine*

GORDON SMITH '90

CONTENTS

The Storyteller	by Bonnie Holmyard	P 3
Situation Wanted	by Helen Connor	P 8
You Lived Among the Colonists?	by Christine Carr	P 9
Genetics	by Helen Connor	P 26
Party Animal	by Peter J Poole	P 27
The Loss	by Sheryl Peterson	P 33
Trial by Error	by Margaret Connor	P 34
Yin 'Etlh, Hegh 'Etlh	by Gail Christison	P 53
Memories	by Jenny Howsam	P 75
Dangerous Diplomacy	by John Gallacher	P 76

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THE STORYTELLER

by

Bonnie Holmyard

"Let's talk, you and I, about fear."

The silence that followed was instantaneous.

The speaker was Commander William Riker, First Officer of the Federation Starship Enterprise. He sat on the edge of his seat, forearms resting atop his knees, hands dangling deceptively at ease between his legs. His icy blue eyes moved slowly, purposely, from one person to the next. His words had captured their complete attention, just as he knew they would. Lazily, he leaned back into his chair and waved one hand nonchalantly in the air.

"Lower lights," he commanded. Instantly the holodeck computer complied.

His setting was perfect; comfortable, but at the same time definitely ominous. A low and mournful wind wailed constantly, rising and falling in intensity, seemingly just outside the room. The room itself was that of a rustic log cabin. An enormous brick fireplace dominated one wall. Its blazing, crackling fire now provided the only light. The shadows moved in, dancing merrily yet menacingly from the dark recesses of the room.

Two couches faced the bright circle of light. On them sat the Enterprise command officers. Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Counselor Deanna Troi and Doctor Beverly Crusher shared one couch. On the other sat Lieutenant-Commander Data, Security Chief Worf and Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge. Between the couches stood the speaker's chair, a high-backed black leather pillow-of-a-thing, unique in its solitude. Riker sank deeper into the sleek lushness and went on.

"Tonight, good friends," he said as he stared into the flickering flames, "I am the storyteller. You shall be my captivated audience. This I can promise you, for my topic is fear."

The lonesome eerie howl of a wolf sounded suddenly, right on cue, and Riker chuckled, forbiddingly. His gaze swept the room. He caught the eye of everyone who tried to smother a snicker or a smile, held each look a long menacing moment, and then said, "So sit back if you will, and relax if you can, and allow me to introduce our guest of honour."

What had started as an intrusion on his time had become, for the First Officer, somewhat of an obsession. It had been Deanna's suggestion, in her role as Ship's Counselor, that the command bridge crew spend the occasional evening together under circumstances other than those associated with duty. Such relaxation would, she had said, help combat the unacknowledged yet very real stress associated with command. The Captain had agreed wholeheartedly with the idea and, Riker had to admit, he too had begun to anticipate the get-togethers, and that each would prove to be as unique as the individual who had the evening. Tonight he was host, and determined to make this a night all gathered would not soon forget.

He cleared his throat. "Fear," he said in a low, confidential tone, "is a primal emotion, an instinct. It is the beast, hideous yet compelling, that lurks in the hearts of all beings."

Riker leaned forward again, once more rested his arms across his knees and stared at his hands. Slowly he steepled the tips of his fingers together, one by one. The flexing motion began. He looked again at the hypnotic flames and spoke, his voice gaining volume with momentum.

"Fear's touch, I have learned, is the slash, swift and deep. Viciously it slices into your consciousness. You feel instantly weak, defenceless, vulnerable. Your body reacts. Adrenalin surges. The hair on the back of your neck starts to rise. Goosebumps sliver along your arms. Shudders race down your spine. Your sweat is cold to your sensitive skin. You start to pant, or hold your breath. You taste the bright steel of panic in your mouth, rolling over your tongue, chiselling its way between your teeth, and your mouth goes instantly dry. Your heartbeat now hammers in your ears. You are alert, eyes darting, your hearing, despite the relentless pounding of blood, somehow more acute. Your instinct to survive is real. And why? Because fear has somehow touched your soul."

His fingertips now felt numb, almost as numb as he'd felt upon waking this morning. He'd had the nightmare again, a nightmare he could not escape. He awakened - as was now, it seemed, his habit - with a start, his body clammy, his survival instincts screaming. The surreal and haunting aftermath clung to him still.

"My story deals with fear," he said. "No," he corrected himself, "with terror; illicit, illogical, groundless terror." He paused. "My tale is true," pause, "and all the more unnerving," pause, "because the main character," pause, "is me."

He stopped abruptly, as if the final word had caught in his throat. He allowed fear to rise to the surface of his consciousness, to shine in his eyes, and turned to acknowledge his listeners.

Deanna jerked upright, her telepathic abilities instantly sensitive to the change in his emotions. The alarm that marred her alluring features was undeniable. She had reacted just as he'd wanted. Riker consciously concealed his inner satisfaction, lest she pick up on that emotion as well.

The domino effect took off. At the Counselor's sudden stilted movement the Captain's relaxed attitude abruptly disappeared. His eyes shot from the ship's Counselor to Riker, filled with concern. The Doctor's look of amusement vanished immediately, as did Worf's. The Klingon almost jumped to his feet - would have, except for Geordi's restraining hand and hurried whisper. Only Data seemed unperturbed. The android watched the happenings around him, neither provoked nor agitated, instinctively recording the disturbance.

Riker turned his eyes back to the fire, as if oblivious of the effect his words had on his fellow crew members. Inwardly he chuckled. He had only just begun.

"Have you ever noticed," he said calmly, assuredly, "how the good fabric of the universe has a way of unravelling sometimes with shocking suddenness?" His words were a question, but he expected no reply. "I have noticed," he said and started to laugh, a bitter, sarcastic laugh. "*Noticed* nothing!" he said sharply. "I have been forced to observe." And he laughed again; harder, harsher, until abruptly, he stopped.

"I have learned, good friends, that there is no line between reality and illusion; no border between sanity and lunacy. I have seen the absurd become the actual, and I for one shudder in terror."

He paused, swallowed hard, and turned to acknowledge his audience once more.

Taking his cue from the others, even Data now sat on the edge of his seat.

"Do you now think me unstable, demented, insane?" Riker demanded, a maniacal gleam in his eyes. "Do I need extensive counselling?" he sneered. His voice took on a mocking tone. "Am I not the capable and outstanding First Officer of the great Starship Enterprise? Or - " and again his tone changed, now uncertain and ambivalent - "am I possessed, obsessed, controlled; a man given to delusions, a man driven by fixations? I no longer know. I can no longer judge." Again he laughed, a forced laugh, the gruesome laugh of a lunatic. Abruptly he stopped. "Hear me out," he said, "and you decide."

Again he paused. Again he swallowed hard. His eyes stared fixedly at the fire. He increased the tempo of his flexing fingers and continued as if in a trance.

"I had a dream," he said, his voice a haunting monotone, "a recurring dream, a nightmare." He shuddered visibly. "It is always the same, always cruelly slow. There is time to see everything in minute detail, to feel each jolting sensation." He shuddered again. "The second night, I thought at the time, was the worst, but then came the third night, and the fourth, and the fifth. Always the same sluggish rendition, now with the added horror of reliving the event, moving toward a known and dreadful conclusion.

"Thus my fascination with fear. It is a real beast, no longer content to lurk in my heart. It now invades my dreams. I have felt its malignant touch. I live with its terrifying presence." His tone became abruptly casual. "But it's just a dream, you may say, a product of my imagination, my subconscious. It is irrational to dwell on such things, illogical to allow it such control over me. This I know. This I admit. Still, I cannot ignore the power of fear because - " and again he paused, long and dramatically, before whispering - "because my dream is becoming reality."

And now he spoke hurriedly, as if at any moment he would find himself stopped by some force not his own. "Step by inevitable step I am drawn, to the abyss, to the point of no return, one footfall away from utter panic, fear coursing through my body with irrefutable force, absolute insanity now but a second away. I am being sucked slowly, terrifyingly, purposefully towards a black and empty oblivion. Is it my death? I do not know, but there is no denying the soul-gripping sensation of impending, unavoidable doom. And that's when my panic surges. That's when fear bites deepest at my soul."

Riker shook his head, twice, as if struggling to pull himself out of his cataleptic state. Once more his eyes - blank eyes, empty eyes, beseeching eyes - flickered over his comrades. He saw the anxiety that washed their faces. He felt their uneasiness.

"But I digress," he said suddenly, "from my dream. Let me share with you its terror." He hesitated, purposely placing a lapse in the flow of his narration. When he continued he stumbled over his words, deliberately displaying his hesitation to go on, continuing as if indeed controlled, held helpless in the grip of some unknown entity to disclose his ominous nightmare.

"In the dream, as is the case so many times in reality, we seven are on the bridge," he said. "All is routine, no crisis at this stage, just the beginning of another ordinary shift. The Captain is dictating his log when he stops suddenly and turns to me. That's when the first shudder races down my spine. I know what he's about to say. That eerie feeling of already having had the conversation rushes over me."

Riker turned to face Picard. The Captain was now definitely disturbed. Riker didn't need the Counselor's Betazed abilities to feel his commander's distress.

"I am not to be disappointed," he said. "The premonition of my dream becomes reality. The Captain asks just what I knew he would. I answer, unaware of what I have said, and turn to face Deanna."

Riker's eyes moved to the Ship's Counselor at his words. She now sat with her legs curled up under her on the couch, a true sign of her discomfort. The black pools of her omniscient eyes were wide with terror.

"Deanna is the next to play her role," The First Officer explained. "She senses my eyes upon her, looks up and begins to smile, but she detects the turmoil of my emotions and her smile never comes to life. She opens her mouth to speak but does not get the chance. It is Worf who speaks, urgently, but with no panic, and my apprehension heightens."

Riker's eyes now move to the Klingon Security Chief. Worf's dark, inscrutable expression had not changed. "'Ship's scanners have picked up an abnormality', he reports, 'just outside sensor range.'"

"And suddenly I'm glad to be sitting for I feel all the strength seep out of my legs. I know, you see, absolutely *know* my nightmare is becoming reality. I wait, breath held in fearful anticipation, terror racing up and down my spine, palms sweaty, knees weak, and debate with myself. Should I speak of what I know? Is my nightmare some sort of warning? Is it just a dream? Coincidence or design? Too many coincidences. I will speak, but not quite yet. Geordi is about to play his part."

Now the First Officer turned to acknowledge the Chief Engineer. La Forge's expression was always the hardest to read. The VISOR he wore over his eyes successfully masked all but his most stringent emotions, but not this evening. There was no denying the grip of La Forge's fascination.

Riker went on. "'Transferring power from shields to sensors,' Geordi says, a simple enough statement, said a hundred times in a hundred similar situations, but I knew, don't you see, I knew he was going to say it. My morbid aggravation increases. The numbness that has struck my legs is moving upwards. I fight for control. What seems to be an eternity I somehow know is only a matter of seconds, but my struggle is fierce. I want to speak, but cannot. I want to move, but am unable. Now is the time, I silently scream, now, *now*, NOW!"

"And that's when the ship's sensors automatically sound Red Alert. The crew reacts. A sudden tension fills the bridge as experts do that which they are trained to do, yet it is not tension that courses through my blood. It is fear. Fear not only for my continued existence, but now for the ship as well. The danger is real. It cannot be ignored. I open my mouth to speak, but I cannot. My voice is gone."

Riker abruptly stopped the flexing motions of his fingers. "My hands fly to my throat," he said, and his hands flew to his throat. "I am panting, yet unable to catch my breath." And he was panting, mouth opening and closing wordlessly. Immediately the Doctor was at his side. He swirled to face her, his eyes narrowing to dangerous slits.

"Doctor Crusher," he said, a hoarse sharp whisper, "I do not need your assistance."

She backed away from him, her reaching hands instantly falling to her sides. Riker read the confusion in her eyes.

"Do not speak," he warned. "I alone am the storyteller."

He watched her take her seat and turned his eyes to Picard. The Captain also sat forward, as if he too were about to spring off the couch, but when their eyes met Picard slowly sank back into his seat. The First Officer went on.

"Our dedicated Doctor has unwittingly re-enacted her part in my nightmare," he said. "You, sir, have restrained yourself. You do not do so in my dream. You are your feet in an instance, your voice full of concern. 'What is happening?' you demand.

"And I try to speak, but I cannot, can only motion my inability, shake my head in frustration. Then Deanna speaks. 'He is unable, Captain,' she says, 'something is stopping him.'

"That's when the sucking sensation starts. My hearing is first to go. Pinpoints of blackness explode before my eyes, swiftly robbing me of sight. I feel the cold vacuum of space reach out to me, pulling the oxygen from my lungs, leaving them straining, useless sacks. The moisture is being sucked out of my body and I can actually hear the greedy slurps. That's when I awake, my body clammy, my survival instincts screaming."

Riker sprang to his feet, towering over his seated crew mates. In four quick strides he stood in front of the fire. For a long moment he did nothing but stare at the dancing flames, then he turned abruptly, walked back to his chair, turned again, and started to pace.

His eyes were on his feet, as if contemplating his next words. That was not the case. He knew exactly what he was going to say, but he wanted to heighten the anticipation, to bring the expectation to a peak before concluding. He ran one hand through his hair, his eyes darting everywhere but at those who stared spellbound at his movements. He considered chewing on his lip, was about to dismiss the idea, when he realized he was already doing so. He almost laughed, debated whether to go with that impulse, but controlled himself. Instead, he came to a sudden halt, took a deep breath, released it noisily, and turned his eyes to the Ship's Counselor.

"Am I insane?" he asked desperately. "You would know, Deanna. Has fear eaten all my courage?"

She returned his stare, her expression one he had witnessed many times before. Her eyes were slightly narrowed, and intense. Her head tilted a little to one side. She was attempting to read his emotions. Riker allowed her to do so.

A smile itched at her lips; he saw it, and almost smiled at the masterful way she concealed the countenance. Her expression was one of pure professionalism when she finally spoke.

"I have learned, my friend," she said, "that there is no line between reality and illusion; no border between sanity and lunacy. I have seen the absurd become the actual, and I for one applaud your performance. You are the consummate actor, Will, a storyteller beyond compare."

And now Riker did smile, a broad happy smile, a smile of pure satisfaction. And his audience did applaud.

"Well done, Number One," Picard said as he rose and extended his hand to his First Officer. "You really had me going there for a while."

"For a while?" Riker questioned, doubt on his face and in his voice.

"That's right," the Captain answered, smiling slyly. "Right up to the point where you reminded Dr Crusher that you alone were the storyteller."

"You had me hooked," La Forge admitted freely.

"Hooked?" Data questioned, and everyone but Worf laughed. Geordi took the android aside to explain the colloquialism as the Klingon spoke.

"I like your introduction best," he said. "Fear sounds like a beast I would like to battle."

"Be careful what you wish for, Lieutenant," the Counselor warned.

"I want to thank you especially, Deanna," Riker said as he moved to her side and put his arm around her shoulder. "The impact would not have been the same without you and the part you so instinctively played."

"I cannot fault you for using me and my abilities," she said, returning his smile, "but your nightmares are real. You do have control over them, don't you?"

"Well, now," Riker said, a faraway look gleaming suddenly in his eyes, "that's another story. Care to hear it?"

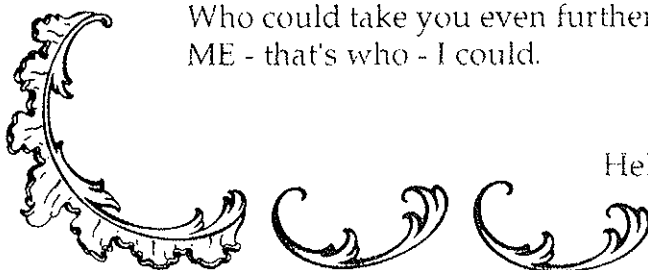
THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Storyteller is the first in a series of short stories recapitulating the command crew's informal get-togethers. Each will be told from the point of view of the particular evening's host. I hope you all enjoyed Commander Riker's unusual form of entertainment and promise you, to quote the illustrious First Officer, each event will prove to be as unique as the individual hosting the evening. Holmyard out. Stardate 9011.12



I'm ready and able, willing to serve,
 I'm an entity, a being with power to spare.
 My existence at present's been empty you see;
 Come on, think of the fun you could see with me.

You're moving farther than expected
 Further than you should.
 Who could take you even further?
 ME - that's who - I could.



Helen Connor



YOU LIVED AMONG THE COLONISTS?

by

Christine Carr

Click.

Lore opened his eyes and found himself staring into the face of his creator.

The android was the child of Dr Noonian Soong's ingenuity, and the cyberneticist knew that all his hard work had finally been vindicated. No-one would call him 'Often Wrong' again: finally Soong had proved that the positronic brain was achievable. The scientist looked down at his creation, and felt the surge of triumph that had eluded him for so long come rushing through his veins. A moment ago the android had been only a mass of circuitry and software, full of potential, but nothing else. Now he was alive. Soong had a son, and no father had ever been more proud.

Lore watched the Human face, and wondered how he had come to be here. This was not a question of who he was, or what force in the universe had created him. The knowledge that he was an android, created by a Human, was programmed into him. The question that Lore wanted answered was, *What is this place in which I find myself?* Wider metaphysical issues were of little concern. He knew his place in the universe, and had no need to query it.

Soong stood, allowing Lore to sit upright. The android looked around him, taking in all the features of his surroundings at a glance. Soong's laboratory was an exercise in chaotic organisation, cluttered but clean. No dust had been permitted to settle anywhere: Soong might be untidy, but he was not so foolish as to permit dirt close to the mechanics of his invention.

Lore turned his yellow gaze back to the Human who was grinning idiotically.

"Inquiry. Who are you?" the android asked.

"I am your father."

Lore stared intently at the Human, and sought to find the logic in that statement. Soong was not his biological parent, so in what sense did he mean to imply a parental relationship? The android's brow furrowed.

Soong looked delightedly at the expression that had popped up on Lore's face. He correctly interpreted Lore's demeanour, and attempted to elaborate. "I created you."

That seemed to satisfy Lore. "Father," he said, simply.

"Yes."

Soong looked around vaguely, and wondered what he was supposed to do now. The Human realised that he had feared to think beyond this moment. After all his failures in the

past, Soong had come to believe that planning ahead more than one step at a time was tempting fate. He decided to let matters take their own course and watched as Lore swivelled his legs off the bench and let them dangle for a moment. Then the android stood up. Lore began to explore the various piles that cluttered the adjacent work benches.

"Inquiry. What are these?" the android asked, pointing at a precarious heap.

"Uh, papers," Soong said. Then he realised that might not be terribly clear to Lore who would have identified the pile as being constructed of a wood pulp product. "That is," he said, "discussion papers circulated by other people living here."

"Inquiry. Other people live here?"

"Yes. There are four hundred and eleven adults here and a number of children. Scientists, for the most part. Their accumulated scientific knowledge is contained in your memory." Soong wondered what had compelled him to programme Lore with the work of people he despised. Convenience, most likely, he supposed. Lore cocked his head, and verified that he contained the relevant files. That he had access to the information seemed to please him, for he smiled faintly.

Lore looked down at the pile of papers once more, and said, "I will read these."

"Go ahead." Soong hid his amusement at the notion. He had no time for the consultation documents, and hated giving criticism of another's work. The only thing he disliked more was receiving criticism of his own. Soong had not bothered to read any of the papers circulated to him and the cyberneticist had provided Lore's memory core only with published works stored in the colony's computer.

Lore flicked through the heap, absorbing the information contained within in a matter of minutes. Then he looked back at the Human who was still watching him, eyes filled with wonder.

"Inquiry. What else is there for me to read?" the android asked.

Soong had created Lore to be a gatherer and giver of information. Even so, Lore's voracious appetite for input surprised him. It was another way in which Lore was exceeding his creator's dreams. That 'inquiry' was beginning to get on Soong's nerves, though. He made a mental note to do something about it.

"This way," Soong said, leading Lore to the computer terminal. "The main library computer cannot be accessed from here, but there is access to enough information about the colony to keep you occupied for a while."

"Thank you, Father." Lore settled down to learn about his new world.

Soong watched the android for a while, then sat down at a nearby bench, and got to work on his next project.

Of course Soong could not hope to keep Lore's presence a secret on Omicron Theta, nor did he want to. Soong recognised that there were proper channels through which Lore should be introduced into society and thus it was that the Human and android set off later that day to see the colony's director.

The man known to the colonists as Cuthbert Lovegrove was not popular. He lacked all manner of social graces, and seemed to find far more pleasure in his own company than he did socialising with other people. The colonists had tried on several occasions to draw the antisocial man into their company, but he had resolutely rebuffed all approaches. He never talked about his work, he never attended seminars, and he never helped with the farm work.

No-one understood why Lovegrove had chosen a colonist's life; he was just not the type.

Given this background, Dr Melvyn Potts was somewhat taken aback when Lovegrove presented himself unannounced and uninvited at his office. Moreover, Lovegrove was not alone. As director, Potts was nominally in charge of the colonists and knew everyone who had settled on Omicron Theta and it had been several months since any ships had visited the colony, yet Lovegrove's companion was a total stranger to him. Where had he come from?

Potts stared from one man to the other, and noted that the stranger would have been a match for Lovegrove some ten years previously, were it not for the abnormal pallor of his skin and those startling yellow eyes.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Dr Lovegrove?"

'Lovegrove' waved the pleasantries aside, aware of the depth of the director's insincerity. "First, I wish to correct you on that point, then I want to introduce you to my son."

Potts stared anew at the stranger and almost missed his visitor's next words.

"Cuthbert Lovegrove was a name I borrowed for convenience only. I am, in fact, Dr Noonian Soong, greatest cyberneticist of our day. And this is Lore, the android I have created."

Potts gathered his straying wits together, and said something that was almost coherent, containing the two key words he had just heard, 'Soong' and 'android'.

Soong nodded impatiently, and feigned a self-deprecating demeanour which was quite at odds with the self-congratulatory description he had used moments before. "Lore has read all the computer's records on Omicron Theta, and is completely familiar with the colony's operations."

"How long has Lore been... um, operating, then?" asked Potts, fascinated and alarmed by the amount of information Lore had been able to absorb without anyone, apart from Soong, knowing about it.

"Oh, about five and a half hours."

"Five hours, thirty two minutes, twenty seven seconds," Lore noted, helpfully.

"Uh... right." Potts was astonished.

Soong said, by way of explanation, "Lore has a storage capacity of some 800 quadrillion bits, and a processing speed of upward of 50 trillion operations per second."

"Fascinating," Potts breathed. Potts did not like the cyberneticist, and he was less than happy at the raspberry Soong had blown at official colony procedure by going off on his own sweet way to create this... android. (Lovegrove had been listed as being an atomic physicist in the original personnel manifest.) In spite of all this, Potts could not help but admire Soong's achievement. "I suppose you're doing the guided tour bit now, are you? Introducing Lore,

that kind of thing?"

"Yes," said Soong, and nodded.

"Right. Fine. I'll, uh, let you get on with it then." Potts turned to Lore, held out his hand, and said, "It's been a pleasure, uh, meeting you."

Lore looked at the extended limb uncomprehendingly. Soong said, "You shake it." Lore's brow furrowed slightly as he wondered how hard and in what direction this should be done. Soong sighed faintly, then took Potts' hand in his own and said, "Like this. See?"

"Yes, Father."

Potts was bemused enough to let Lore try, but said afterward, as he clutched his fingers gently, that Lore would have to work on his grip a little. The android did not understand what he had done wrong: had he not gripped tightly enough, then? Soong understood Potts' veiled warning, though, and he resolved to have a quiet word with Lore about his strength. The cyberneticist and the android left.

Once Potts was alone again, he summoned a doctor, then poured himself a stiff drink.

The farms of Omicron Theta were flourishing. There were cattle in the fields though they did not serve any practical purpose and the cereal crops were almost ready for harvest. Pilar leaned against the wooden fence and looked at her handiwork with satisfaction.

When Samuel had first suggested that they join the colony Pilar had been dubious about the idea. Unlike her husband, she was not a scientist and she had feared that the isolation of a backwater planet would drive her crazy. Instead, she had discovered an unsuspected love of the land, and found total fulfilment in overseeing the farm work. It did not matter to her that the farms served no true purpose and were only there because some long-forgotten psychologist had determined years ago that all colonies required agricultural land. She knew that her work was admired by the majority of the colonists and she was happy. Most of the residents of Omicron Theta helped out with the more mundane chores for a few hours once or twice a week, finding the change of pace to be relaxing. The anonymous psychologist had obviously known his onions, as her maternal grandmother used to say.

Just now, though, she was the only worker above ground. Harvest was not due to start for several weeks yet, and, until then, she could manage more or less alone.

She gradually became aware of someone walking behind her and turned around to greet whoever it was. Her movement caused her to come face to face with Dr Soong and the android. Gossip travelled round the colony at light speed, and Samuel had told Pilar about the colony's latest addition at dinner the evening before. Pilar wryly noted where Soong's priorities had placed the planet's topside functions. Lore was being introduced to these last of all. Still, the unintended slight gave her no excuse to be rude. She greeted the pair politely.

"Hello," she said. Then, looking directly at the android, she said, "You must be Lore." Pilar held out her hand.

"Hello." The android responded to her greeting. His grip was light, but Pilar had the feeling that it was carefully controlled to be so. Lore did not seem entirely comfortable with the gesture.

"I'm Pilar Rodrigo," she said, by way of introduction. "I'm in charge up here."

"What purpose do the farms serve?" Lore asked. "All food requirements are met through the food slots and replicator mechanisms."

Pilar explained about the research done a century earlier into the psychological requirements of Human colonists. Lore did not seem impressed. And, she thought wryly, why should he be? He surely had no need of such mental props.

Indeed, Lore was fascinated to discover an area of Human weakness. Since being awakened by Dr Soong, Lore had formulated the working hypothesis that Humans were infallible. He assumed that any force which was capable of giving life to another type of being must be equal or superior to the product. It was an intriguing notion that that might not be the case. A seed of doubt had been planted in Lore's mind, and he resolved to investigate further.

For the next few days the main topics of conversation on Omicron Theta centred on Soong and his android. Much of this escaped the ears of Soong himself. Lore, however, absorbed the information easily.

Security had never been tight on Omicron Theta, and it never crossed anyone's mind to give Lore less than full access to the colony's facilities. With his acute hearing, Lore was more than able to monitor the range of conversations being conducted. Soong had, of course, neglected to inform the android that eavesdropping was impolite, and the other colonists were blissfully ignorant of Lore's auditory capabilities.

It did not, therefore, take Lore long to realise that Soong had a nickname, and an uncomplimentary one at that. 'Often Wrong' turned up in conversation a number of times before the android figured out that the name referred to his creator. When he did, he made a beeline for the library, and searched through the wire service archives for references to the cyberneticist. Lore managed to piece together a sketchy history of Soong's last few years on Earth, and his blatant failure to achieve the positronic brain. He had promised so much, lied about his results, and had been chased from a range of academic establishments. His research techniques had been considered dubious, and his attitude had been less than conciliatory when challenged.

For the first time Lore considered the possibility that his creator might be fallible. The android pondered over the notion for quite some time.

Days turned into weeks on Omicron Theta. Once the novelty of Lore's presence wore off the colony settled back into its usual routines. No-one bothered to notify the outside world about the android's presence, assuming that Soong would get around to it eventually. Soong and Lore were to be seen in each other's company more and more rarely, as the scientist cloistered himself in his laboratory, leaving Lore to his own devices.

Lore had a lot of spare time. The android came to believe that he had ceased to be of interest to Dr Soong once he had achieved consciousness. He gradually became aware that this indifference was not normal for a father/son relationship, and, while he realised that he was not a typical son, he found it all very puzzling.

The android reflected that talking to someone about this might be helpful, but he did not know anyone he could ask. Soong despised them all, and Lore, having quickly found reason to abandon his working hypothesis, did not think to question his creator's wisdom in the matter.

The android recalled one of the few walks Soong and he had taken together during the first days of his existence. They had passed in close proximity to a gymnasium from which floated the sound of shouting. Intrigued, Lore diverted his path to take a closer look. He tilted his head on one side, and watched, fascinated.

Some twenty Humans, dressed in the white suits of tae kwondo practitioners, were lined up in rows of five each. They moved in time with the instructor's commands, right foot, left foot, punching all the time. Then the command changed. 'Dwiyo torro!' the instructor ordered. As one the class pivoted on the spot, and turned to face the opposite wall. "Ap chabusigi doo kaunde jirugi! Hanna! Dool! Seth! Neth!" The students moved in time with the calls, front kicking and double punching down the length of the hall.

Lore watched, then turned to Soong and asked, "Father, what are they doing?"

"It's exercise. Humans do it for a variety of reasons; because it's fun, to keep fit, self-defence... I've never seen the appeal of martial arts, myself."

"Inquiry: to keep fit?"

"I've told you before; no-one says 'inquiry' like that."

"Yes, Father. I will try to adjust that area of my behaviour. However, I suspect that it is a type of conduct that is programmed into me, rather than acquired. I am having difficulty deleting it from my operations."

Soong wondered about that. He could not think of any particular reason why the software should demand such behaviour, but programming was an exact art. Who knew what one slight error might cause?

Lore dragged Soong's attention back to the matter in hand, and reminded him of his question.

"If Humans don't exercise enough they become fat and unhealthy. It's like... a form of preventative health care."

Lore absorbed this information, and thought how terribly fragile Humans must be. To have to exercise in such a manner must imply a major design flaw. The android asked another question. "Father. Why would Humans do such simple manoeuvres? It looks quite tedious."

"Lore," Soong said. "You learn things almost immediately, by watching. In that respect you are superior to Humans. We must practise every new skill until we master it completely. Even then, we have to remind ourselves of it from time to time, else we forget. They are practising movements. Learning them."

Lore was intrigued by Soong's comments, and he recalled his conversation with Pilar Rodrigo a couple of days earlier. Humans appeared to be so limited. The android could see better, read faster, learn quicker, was stronger and was permanently 'fit'. The android tentatively suggested, "Then I am superior to Humans, Father?"

Soong was not entirely sure that he liked hearing those words, but he could not deny the truth of Lore's observations. "That's about the size of it, yes. But never forget, in spite of Human limitations, it was a Human who created you."

"I will not forget, Father."

Lore had thought long and hard about that conversation. He also thought about the wire service reports he had read. He was not sure whether the 'Often Wrong' persona was the real Soong, or whether the scientist was a misunderstood genius. He decided to give Soong the benefit of the doubt, and came to the conclusion that Soong must be a truly remarkable Human being to have overcome all his Human limitations to create something as advanced as himself. Yet Humans generally seemed slow to Lore, and he felt little desire to talk with any of the other colonists. Somewhere, Lore supposed, there must be another Human as smart as his creator: he would have been happy to talk to such a person. But all evidence to date suggested that there was nobody like that on Omicron Theta, so the android was compelled to muddle along as best he could.

Lore grew tired of spending time in Soong's laboratory. The Human did not choose to talk to him very often, wrapped up as he was in his work. On one occasion, Lore asked him what he was doing. Soong responded by asking Lore whether he would like to have a sibling. The creation of another android was not a possibility that Lore had considered, though it was a perfectly logical progression to Soong's work. Nonetheless, Lore found the idea disconcerting, and he chose to avoid answering Soong's question. In any case, it was apparent that Lore's thoughts on the matter were irrelevant as Soong was already engrossed in the project.

It had not taken Lore long to discover that Omicron Theta's central library facility carried the majority of knowledge available to the United Federation of Planets, and he came to spend a lot of time there. Sometimes he wondered whether Soong even noticed his prolonged absences.

The android became something of a recluse. He saw little merit in mixing with the Humans. The android had found his *raison d'être* in amassing huge quantities of information, and the colonists had little to contribute to the android's pet project. They, in turn, did not know how to relate to the android, and, given that he was a machine, saw little merit in exploring the possibilities.

Life on Omicron Theta settled back into its usual routine, and the colonists largely forgot that Lore was a relatively new addition to their community. It seemed as though he had been part of the scenery for years, not weeks.

The power generator blew at 0300 hours one night, plunging the underground complex into darkness. Its explosion was muffled by the soundproof walls of the facility, and most of the colonists slept through the disaster. The first they knew of the incident was when they woke up to the muted tones of the emergency lighting some hours later.

Lore, however, was staring intently at one of the computer screens in the library when his acute hearing detected the blast. The lights failed a fraction of a second afterwards. The work station at which the android was seated went blank, and he pursed his lips in annoyance. He disliked interruptions.

The android could cope without light in a way that Humans could not, and it did not take him long to navigate his way through the tunnels of Omicron Theta which, without the background hum of the air conditioning system, were now eerily quiet.

Several engineers were already hard at work when the android reached the generator room, shifting through the debris of the failed mechanism. Potts, looking half asleep, was consulting with a middle aged man called Andy Jenkins. Backup systems were unable to provide enough power for all the normal functions of the colony to operate, and the two men were working through a checklist of operations, trying to establish a hierarchy of priorities.

Lore watched for a few moments, then tentatively approached. Normally he would have avoided contact with the Humans, but he wanted to get back to his studies, and he knew that he was better qualified than most to help speed up the repairs.

"May I be of assistance?" the android asked politely. Lore's voice startled the Humans who were concentrating on the task in hand.

"No thanks," Jenkins said, apparently without giving any thought to the idea. "We've got it all under control now." Several other colonists nodded their agreement.

Lore frowned slightly, and retreated. He was astonished that the Humans had refused his offer and was puzzled by this illogical behaviour. He was superior to the colonists in so many ways and he knew that he possessed the power to assist them greatly. Why would they reject his help in such a fashion? Lore brooded, wondering why it bothered him. Though he could not have put a name to the thoughts he was entertaining, he realised that he was beginning to see Humans in a new light. He was beginning to experience an emotional response called anger.

The more Lore thought about it, the greater his suspicions about the Humans' motives became. The one thing he did not consider was that the Humans' actions might have been prompted by a lack of data. They did not know how much information he had at his disposal; no-one had ever seen fit to tell them. Perhaps the Humans doubted that he possessed any relevant knowledge, or perhaps they thought that learning to relate to the android would more than take up any time that his help might save them. Lore, however, determined that the Humans of Omicron Theta were prejudiced against him, and decided that, if that were the case, he was quite capable of reciprocating the sentiment.

Power was rationed for a number of days. According to the priorities established by Potts and Jenkins, energy was diverted to food production equipment, air conditioning and other environmental control equipment.

Lore disliked the set of priorities established by the Humans, and, instead of seeing the logic of the situation, perceived it as further evidence of the colonists' dislike of him. The android's requirements were not the same as Human ones, and he saw little merit in giving toilet facilities greater importance than library computer operations. When he saw that library computer access time was to be rationed to one hour a day per person until further notice, the android experienced a sensation of dismay. He decided to protest that this rationing of time was unfair, and that he should be allocated a greater share.

Lore presented a well argued case to Potts. His claim was based on the following grounds. First, he did not eat, and he felt that his share of the energy diverted to the food servers should be used for something that he did do. Second, as he did not sleep he deserved extra time to fill up the extra hours of consciousness that he experienced. Third, he had no other sort of research to keep him occupied, and he felt that that also increased the validity of his argument.

Unfortunately, what with one thing and another, Potts had not slept for thirty two hours, and arbitrating an android's grievance was the last thing he wanted to do. He listened impatiently to Lore's request, then said, "Sorry, no can do."

"But," said Lore, "it's not fair."

Potts stared at the android, amazed at his naivety. "Life's not fair." As far as he was concerned, that closed the conversation.

Lore did not understand impatience, and could not forgive the abruptness of Potts's reply. His anger grew.

"Time to log off, Lore." Kafryn smiled tentatively. She had not really wanted to disturb the android as she felt intimidated by him, but it was her computer time he was poaching, and she had some research to get on with.

Lore did not respond. He had noted that sometimes Humans had 'selective hearing' and he had decided to develop the same disability.

Kafryn swallowed, and walked up so she was directly in front of him. "Lore?" she said.

Still he gave no reply.

Kafryn tapped him on his shoulder. He could not ignore that, she thought. Even so, there was a pause of several seconds before Lore looked up at her.

The young women stepped back, startled by the raw anger on Lore's face. She had had no idea that the android was capable of any emotion. Lore stood up, wordlessly vacated the work station, and headed for the door. Kafryn shook her head slightly, bemused. She sat down and started to key in her request.

On his way out of the library, Lore was overcome by a mad impulse and he swept his arm into the clear walls of the facility. Glass shattered, and Kafryn jumped up and stared at the resulting mess in horror and disbelief. The android seemed as startled as she did, for he stared at the damage he had caused, then ran away with inhuman speed.

It did not take long for other colonists to respond to the commotion. Kafryn still stood rooted to the spot. Lore was long gone.

When Lore fled from the library he headed for a place where he knew he was unlikely to meet any Humans. On the planet's surface night was settling in, and it was a safe bet that Pilar Rodrigo and her helpers would have gone below several hours previously.

Lore did not stop running until he was about a kilometre from the colony complex. He made his way through the copse on the far side of the cultivated area, and stopped only when he found a glade furnished with several convenient rocks for sitting on. No doubt, he thought, this was another example of Humans' 'improving' on nature.

The Omicron Thetan night was silent except for the breeze rustling the leaves on the surrounding trees. The android settled himself down on one of the boulders, and brooded.

All he wanted was to accumulate information; for the android this was a function as important as eating or breathing was for Humans. His quest for knowledge had become an all-consuming passion, an addiction. Unfortunately, though, current circumstances were preventing him from satisfying the need he felt, and he had been aware of an increasing sensation of frustration and anger over the last few days. Though he had done his best to ignore them, these feelings had been a constant irritant in the background of his mind.

Tonight, though, the emotions had got out of control. How was he able to fly into a fit of

rage? He was an android! Lore was certain that Soong had not programmed him for anger, which suggested that Lore's behaviour was no longer being determined by his original programme. Could he have evolved beyond it?

That was an intriguing notion. And surely it was quite impossible.

No, thought Lore, there is a higher probability that I am experiencing a malfunction, in which case I need help, and there is only one person on Omicron Theta who can help me, but Dr Soong will be asleep at this hour. Lore could do nothing but wait for morning.

Dr Noonian Soong was so engrossed in his work that he almost failed to notice Lore enter the laboratory. The Human grunted a greeting without turning his attention away from the task in hand, then he said, more clearly, "Could you pass me the number five probe, Lore?"

"No," the android replied.

"No?" asked Soong, perplexed. Lore had never failed to do as he was asked before.

"You haven't said the magic word, Father." Lore's voice had taken on a vaguely teasing tone. The android picked up the device in question and twiddled it between his fingers. "Pretty please."

Soong's eyes opened wide. "Humour, Lore?"

"Perhaps," said the android, who was beginning to suspect that his actions were prompted more by malice. He wondered why that might be.

Obediently Soong said, "Please."

Lore tossed him the probe and Soong returned to work. The android mooched around the office, just as an irritatingly bored Human might. Soong found Lore's pottering to be distracting, and he wondered whether or not he might persuade the android to leave.

Lore considered how best to bring up the reason for his visit. He felt oddly reluctant to describe the nature of his malfunctioning. Could it be that he was embarrassed to admit to any kind of weakness?

"Father," the android said.

"Yes?"

"I would like to talk with you, Father."

"Go on." Soong did not look up from his work, and Lore wondered just how much attention Soong was paying to the conversation.

"I think," said the android, "that I have been experiencing malfunctions. My diagnostic programme can identify no errors, but I have been experiencing... emotions." Lore decided not to elaborate on the nature of his reckless impulses unless he had to.

"Emotions?" Soong briefly turned his head towards the android. "That's wonderful, Lore! Congratulations!"

"But surely I am not programmed to experience - " Lore broke off, not knowing how much information he should volunteer.

Soong smiled slightly, his mind still half on the mass of circuitry laid out before him. "Of course you're programmed to experience emotions. I couldn't hope to have provided you with anything more than the very barest of resonances, but if that's all that is bothering you... Well, I doubt you have anything to worry about."

"But Father - "

"If you are still concerned in a couple of days, we'll discuss it again then. But I really doubt that you have anything to worry about."

The 'barest of resonances' did not even begin to describe the rage Lore had experienced; he was not getting through to his creator.

"Father," Lore tried again.

"Not now, Lore, please. I've reached a delicate point here; downloading information into Data's memory and positronic brain."

"Data?"

"Your brother."

"Ah," said Lore. It was difficult to believe that this heap of hardware would one day soon become like him. He had not been aware that Soong had got so far with developing the second android. The realisation did not please him.

"Father," Lore said, switching the conversation back to its original subject, "it's not what you think. My emotions are beyond 'bare resonances'. They are unpredictable, unmanageable. I'm not sure that I can control them."

Soong, only half concentrating on Lore's words, said, "Who would want to control them? Other than a Vulcan, of course. Emotions, by their nature, are unpredictable. Do not be concerned." The conversation was beginning to bore him.

Lore wondered what he could do to convince Soong that something really was wrong. The android needed to divert the scientist's attention away from 'Data' and towards himself. He moved with lightening speed, and cut the datafeed connections before Soong even suspected Lore's intent.

"Lore!" Soong cried out, in consternation. "What was that for?" All the data would have to be recollated before another attempt at downloading could be made. Hours, days even, of work had been lost in one go.

"Father," the android said, urgently. Desperate now, he abandoned his earlier reticence, determined to make Soong understand his problem. "Listen to me! I need help! Yesterday I was overcome by anger, and I smashed a wall. Help me, Father! Please!"

"You... smashed a wall?" Soong asked in disbelief.

"It was only glass." But, Lore thought, that was not really the point.

Soong looked at his creation thoughtfully. How was this possible? The Human made his way to a chair. Once seated, he spoke. "I don't understand. What made you do such a thing?"

"I don't know. I was angry." The android sounded perplexed. "You must help me." Then, as if struck by a new thought, Lore asked, "You can help me? Can't you?"

Soong did not reply immediately. "I don't know. I must think about this, consider what part of your programme can have enabled you to experience these emotions."

Lore stared at Soong, dismayed at the thought that the cyberneticist might not be able to help. He turned on his heel, and left the lab. Later Soong wondered if he had imagined it, but it sounded as though Lore said, "Damn you, Father."

The android had given Soong much to think about. But first, there was Data to consider.

It was perhaps unfortunate that Pilar Rodrigo noticed the entity before anyone else. She looked up from her harvesting and saw it hanging in the sky above her, a huge crystalline shape quite unlike anything she had seen before.

"Look!" she cried, and pointed.

Her three helpers stopped working, turned to face her, then followed her gaze.

There was no doubt as to what she was looking at.

"What the Heck is that!?" "What the..." "Holy cow!"

The Humans stared for a few moments, letting their tools fall unnoticed on the soil at their feet. Then they turned tail and ran. Someone down below had to know what that thing was, surely!

Anthony Mercado was bored. It was his turn to monitor the orbiting sensors, a job he detested. Nothing had changed in the twenty three months since the colony had been established, and nobody had reason to suppose that anything was going to happen now. It might be official policy that sensors should be monitored at all times, but that was a rule that the Omicron Thetans had come to believe was made to be broken. Nowadays they tended to do a cursory sensor scan once every few hours, according to a rota.

Anthony approached the sensor console unenthusiastically, and was just starting to key in the necessary commands to operate the system when Pilar and her three volunteers charged into the room out of breath. Anthony looked at them in astonishment.

"There's a... well... something... out there," Pilar panted. It was not a comprehensive report by any means, but it was the best that she could do.

"Yeah! A great... crystalline... form," one of the helpers, a young man, added. The others nodded agreement.

Anthony turned back to his console, and rapidly completed the access codes. The

screens came alive with data, and he stared at it in astonishment.

Then everything went blank.

"Hot dang!" he swore. "The first time anything interesting has ever appeared on these screens, and the system fails."

Her breathing slowly returning to normal, Pilar said, "Or was destroyed."

"Surely not," Anthony said, but his voice was tinged with doubt. "It's got to be coincidence."

The Humans stared at one another. Then someone said, "We'd better call Potts."

The error, Soong thought, has to lie within the programming concerned with basic emotions.

He had had doubts when he had written the software, but had dismissed them. Now, though, he was wondering if he had not been a little hasty. Even so, he could find no ready explanation for the perversion of the programme. Perhaps it was just as well that Lore had interrupted the loading of Data's memory. Soong could delete that section of the software - it was not essential to the operation of the android - and relax in the knowledge that his second child would never experience similar difficulties. True, he would rather that his sons could relate to Human emotional experiences, but one could not have everything one wanted in this world. Soong sighed sadly.

The cyberneticist wondered what to do about Lore. Soong was not ready to entertain the idea of deleting any part of the android's programme. To him, Lore was alive, and this operation smacked too much of an old Earth procedure called a lobotomy. He doubted that Lore, if presented with the choice, would be prepared to entertain the idea of losing control of all his emotions. There had to be a better solution to the problem.

Soong realised that he could not postpone making a decision for ever, but he found he wanted a few days' grace more. *Anyway, he thought, surely Lore has exaggerated the problem.*

Potts called all the colonists together to discuss the crystalline entity and the equipment failures.

"It's no coincidence that subspace communications are being jammed," Potts announced. "It would seem to imply that an intelligence exists behind that thing. And it means we can't call for help."

"Not that there would be any guarantee help would arrive in time," observed Jenkins drily.

"What are we going to do?" several voices asked from the floor.

"Only thing we can do, I suppose. Prepare for a siege." *Not, Potts thought, that that will necessarily protect us.* There were already indications that surface vegetation was dying.

Potts decided that the colonists must be kept occupied, and to that end, ordered that the

entry to the underground facility be camouflaged. He did not believe that such an action would do anything to protect them: the entity already was aware of their existence.

Lore listened to the debate without comment. The only thing of interest to him were the possibilities presented by the entity. The alarm it engendered in the Humans seemed to wash over him, and left him unaffected.

An alien intelligence, he thought. Intriguing! What knowledge might it have to impart? How might it expand his horizons? The android considered his options, and resolved to communicate with it.

If they ever discovered what he was doing he would be in big trouble, Lore knew, which was why he had waited until the middle of the night before making his attempt. He keyed in an access code to the subspace transmitter, and aimed it directly at the entity. He spoke. "Crystalline entity, please respond."

There was no reply. The entity must surely be aware of the broadcast though, he thought. If it were not aware of the radio, how could it be sure of jamming the correct frequencies? The android twiddle the controls and tried again.

This time his efforts were rewarded by a wordless response. Lore keyed in the universal translator, and gradually the contract between android and entity was confirmed.

The following afternoon Potts appeared unannounced at Soong's laboratory, and walked in without knocking. He clasped a bunch of papers in his hand, and he held these out to the startled cyberneticist. Soong looked at the drawings he had been given, then he wordlessly regarded the colony's director, waiting for him to give some kind of an explanation for his actions.

"Where's Lore?" Potts asked.

Soong shrugged. "Around."

Potts pursed his lips in disapproval, wondering if Soong could really be so oblivious of his creation's activities as he seemed.

"You know our lives are on the line here." Potts made the statement into a question.

"Yes."

"Kids at school drew those." Potts gestured towards the drawings. "I want you to have them."

"Me? Why?"

"Lore has been in contact with that entity - several times, we think. He might have been making a deal with it."

"A deal? What deal?"

"Our lives for information."

Soong stared at Potts in disbelief. "Lore did what?! He wouldn't! You must be wrong."

"Anthony Mercado caught him talking to the entity about half an hour ago. He challenged Lore, and Lore responded by throwing him across the room. Mercado is now nursing a broken leg."

"Lore isn't programmed to harm anyone."

"So? That didn't help Mercado any."

Soong shook his head. His next words were whispered, but Potts still managed to catch them. "I knew he was having problems, but I'd no idea things had got this bad."

"You KNEW? Problems? What problems?"

Soong looked up as if he had been struck. He had not meant to speak aloud. "He was frightened because of his emotions. I told him not to worry."

"You told him what?" The android was dangerous, perhaps homicidal. How could Soong, who called himself his father, have dismissed him so lightly.

"Emotions are normal for Humans."

"Lore isn't Human."

"No." Soong looked troubled. "But he's still my son."

Potts looked at Soong, aware, perhaps for the first time, of how much love the cyberneticist had invested in his project. He forced himself to become calm, then he said, "He must be destroyed. You realise that, don't you?"

"No." Soong said it quietly, with determination. It was not so much a denial of Lore's dangerous status, but rather a statement of where he felt his priorities lay.

Potts spoke again. "It doesn't really matter what you think. If you don't destroy him, someone else will. Eventually. We'll just have to hope that he doesn't get too many of us first."

Soong stared at the other man as the truth of his words slowly began to sink in. If the majority of the colonists wanted to kill his child, they would find a way to do it. Potts seemed to sense the change in Soong's attitude, and he risked saying, "If he comes back here, you must destroy him."

Soong said bitterly, "I don't know if I can do that."

"You must. Look at those pictures. That's the reality that's facing the colony."

Soong turned his eyes back to the drawings. They showed the entity hanging above them, and people running away from it. The Humans were shown fleeing in all directions, but there was no where for them to go. He stared at the pictures for a long moment, then slowly he nodded. It hurt him to say his next words, and he knew Potts would never understand how much. "I'll think about it. I'll try to do... what you said."

Potts sighed. He had hoped that Soong would have given some kind of guarantee, but he knew better than to press the matter. He stood, as though to leave.

"Wait!" Soong's command stopped Potts. "There is just one thing."

"Yes?"

"It's Data." Soong gestured towards the head, thorax and limbs on his work bench.

Potts blanched slightly, as he realised that here was another android near completion. As if there were not enough problems already. Potts turned troubled eyes towards Soong.

The cyberneticist was not surprised at the other's reaction. He had anticipated the mentality which decreed that if one should be destroyed, then so should the other. "I want guarantees that he will not be harmed. If I have that assurance, I'll do as you ask."

"But, if it's identical to Lore?"

Soong sighed, and shook his head. "I don't fully understand what happened to Lore. I tried to programme him for basic emotions, but things seemed to get somewhat out of hand." He shrugged. "Data has none of that programming. He will never experience the emotions Lore does."

"I don't like it," Potts admitted. "Do you have any guarantees?"

"Nothing is ever certain, but I think that there will be no difficulties with this one."

Potts thought hard for a few minutes. Soong really was not in any position to bargain, but, if what he said was true, perhaps there was a way in which they all could benefit. The chances were, in all reality, that they were about to die, and there was only one possible way that their work could live on.

"I'll agree. On one condition."

"What condition?" Soong's response was wary.

"That you store all the memories of the colonists' research in him so that, if we die, the work done here will not be lost."

Soong nodded. He did not mention that, had Lore not sabotaged his previous attempt at loading the information into Data's memory, the new android would already have contained that knowledge.

"Can you guarantee that he'll survive the destruction of the colony?" Potts asked.

"I don't know. I'll figure something out."

Potts nodded curtly. "I hate to say this, but as soon as possible, if you can."

Soong agreed.

After Potts had gone, Soong thought back over the conversation. He had worked all his adult life to build an android. *To take away Lore's life is tantamount to murder*, he thought. Yet Lore might well hold the fate of the colony in his hands, and perhaps, in that case, trading the life of one android for another was fair.

The cyberneticist put the children's drawings on the wall where he could see them. He

knew, when the moment came to deactivate Lore, that he would need to be reminded of his promise and the danger they were in. He hoped he could cope with the guilt.

Meanwhile, there was work to be done.

Lore came back to the laboratory eventually, just as Soong had known he would. There was nowhere else for him to go.

Lore faced his creator, and for the first time Soong saw him as threatening. "They want to kill me!"

Soong forced himself to ask his child the question that had been bothering him. He waved his hand in the general direction of the outside, and asked, "What do you know about that... thing?"

"Nothing."

So, thought Soong, *he has learned to lie, too*. The android looked sullen. "Lore!" Soong shouted. The android's head snapped round in surprise. For the first time in weeks Lore felt himself to be the focus of Soong's entire attention. "What do you know about it? What does it want?"

"It wants..." Lore felt himself caught in Soong's spell. To his surprise, the android found he did care about his creator, in spite of everything. Lore could no more deny his father all the answers than he could give up his quest for knowledge. The android began again. "It feeds on life. It stores the knowledge of its victims and..." Lore turned imploring yellow eyes on Soong. "It's coming here. It offered me the knowledge it holds for the lives of the colonists. You must get us away from here!"

Soong turned his gaze towards the ground, and muttered sotto voce, "And you wonder why they wish to destroy you." More loudly he said, "And did you agree to help it? Tell me, Lore! Tell me!"

"No, Father."

"But you have been in contact with it?"

"Father," Lore began, "I know what I did was wrong"

"But you did it anyway." Soong's voice was quiet and tinged with sadness.

"I didn't think! Father, take me away from here! Give me a second chance! I'll prove myself to you!"

"Lore." When Soong was sure that he had the android's full attention, he said, "You are my son, but..."

"Father! I know you have some means of leaving here. I've studied you, and you've never settled anywhere without having some means of -"

"Enough!"

Lore calmed himself immediately. "Father?" he said, unsure of himself for once.

Soong looked at his son, and knew he might never have another chance like this. He walked up alongside his offspring, and casually put his arm around Lore's shoulders. Lore looked at Soong, taken aback by this unexpected display of affection.

"Father, you must leave here."

"Perhaps you are right."

"Father? Will you give me a second chance?"

"Yes, Lore. I will. You are my son."

Soong reached down, and switched him off.

For a long time the cyberneticist looked at the inert form in front of him. It was bad that Potts had petitioned him to destroy his creation and worse that he saw the wisdom of this action. Soong had to believe that Lore had not agreed to help the crystal entity: the alternative was too appalling to contemplate. He felt compelled to give his son the benefit of this doubt.

Soong detached the limbs and head of his wayward creation, but did no more than that. He had promised Lore a second chance, and this was the only way he could see to give it. If Soong left him here, like this, stored... One day, perhaps, Soong would come back... Or perhaps the colony would survive... Or someone else would find Lore, and restore him to life.

Soong shook his head sadly, knowing deep down that he would never come back for Lore, and no-one else was likely to have the knowledge to reconstruct the android, even if they might wish to do so. It was not much of a second chance he was offering his son, Soong knew, but it was the best he could do.



GENETICS

Genetic engineering's not all it's cracked up to be.
Do we really need such changes in the basic you or me?
Look at the dangers it could cause, the new disease it could bring -
Yes interfering with basic patterns could be a dangerous thing.

See what it did to Taloka and to his gallant crew;
Behold the deadly effect on Gagaran and on you;
In trying to improve mankind see the price they have to pay -
For all their lives in quarantine their children have to stay.

Helen Connor



PARTY ANIMAL

(A POPPET TALE)

by

P.J.Poole

Lt. Cmdr. Data paused in the entranceway to the C-Deck crew refectory, his golden eyes searching the room until they alighted on the form of Ensign Poppet. Given that said form was approximately 8 feet tall and decidedly lutrine in appearance the search did not take long.

Poppet was standing by one of the replicator hatches, chittering in annoyance and presenting her shipboard compcard to the hatch's sensor slot for the umpteenth time, and was therefore totally unaware of Data's approach until he spoke.

"Is there a problem, Ensign?"

It is difficult for an otter to jump a foot in the air, spin completely around, register shock and recognition and then land in a posture of whisker bristling attention, but Poppet gave it her best shot.

"Oh! No, sir! I mean not really... I mean no, sir!"

Data stepped back, registering with wonder the mobility of the ensign, her physique, the structure of her species, then for the rest of a split second he processed the semantic content of her reply.

"You seemed to be having difficulty with the card? I would be happy to instruct you in its use if there is any difficulty..."

Poppet's attention span for standing at attention and her awe at being addressed by one of the senior bridge crew both having expired she began a weaving motion of her head and an unconscious tapping of her tail tip as she softly wailed to Data, "I am being caused some frustration - this card will not fill my order for more crustaceans."

Data took the card from Poppet's webbed fingers.

"Accessing" he said, adjusting eyesight to macro detail and em spectrum as he read the dataglyphs on the card edge. A moment later he adjusted focus and looked at Poppet as he spoke.

"Apparently the card has been miscoded - the amount of seafood and shellfish that you have been accessing would have undesirable effects if consumed by a Human, and so the fitness and health monitor safety locks have been engaged... This card will probably only allow you to order vegetable matter dishes for the next few days."

"Oh my! Oh no, oh dear, that really isn't a very good idea," murmured Poppet in evident distress.

"Fortunately," continued Data, "it is a relatively simple matter to have the card

recalibrated. If you wish, I will keep the card, attend to the changes and return it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" said Poppet, still sounding forlorn. Contemplating the conversation and situation, Data jumped to a tentative deductive conclusion.

"How long has the card been ineffective?" he enquired.

"Since breakfast. Yesterday," confessed Poppet, hungrily, and with a slightly more emphatic tail twitch.

"Unacceptable," stated Data. "Why have you not reported the situation to your section head?"

"I didn't want to make a fuss, or seem like I was causing bother," said Poppet, seeming close to tears. "I can go without for quite a while - if I have to," she added firmly.

Data mentally reviewed a manifest that he had signed earlier that day. Then a toxicology chart for Poppet's species. "You do not have to. I will have the card fixed for tomorrow. For tonight, if you will accompany me to Cargo 17 we have on board a number of cases of Dentrassian food supplies for supply to Starbase 137 which I believe you would find palatable and harmlessly nutritious?"

"Oh, yes, please," hummed Poppet, thrusting her muzzle forward in happiness.

Data left the refectory with Poppet in close pursuit, both blissfully unaware of the number of amused and bemused expressions the spectacle caused.

Murphy was a 20-year man with 4 years yet to serve. Content with the rank of Quartermaster, seeking neither advancement nor adventure, master of his stores and subservient to none, he was the kind of man described in earlier centuries as unflappable. That the Enterprise should have an android Second Officer phased him not at all, that said officer should arrive unexpectedly and requisition materials on the offshift gave him not a single qualm, but that the materials were for the benefit of a crewman who appeared to be a very hungry eight foot otter... *that* gave pause to a man who had spent 16 years avoiding away team duty.

As Murphy punched in stock codes for the servo-unit to retrieve, Poppet swayed from side to side, crooning in anticipation and expressing her gratitude to Data most profusely. Data was fascinated by her every movement, by every nuance and gesture, a condition that Poppet was blissfully unaware of...

"...really is most kind of you..."

"Please, Ensign, it is not kindness but simple common sense. Indeed, one might even call it fair recompense for your allowing me to speak with you and to observe your reactions, which was indeed my intention when I sought you out earlier."

The eternal paranoia of the junior officer noticed by a superior was not a part of Poppet's nature, but insatiable curiosity most certainly was.

"Sought me out? Oh my, whyever would you do that?"

"Because I wish to understand Humans, and I have found that studying non-Humans can give me new insights to that goal," said Data calmly.

"Oh," said Poppet, whiskers drooping slightly, "I thought that perhaps you were just being friendly."

Sensing a change in tone Data reviewed the conversation and formed conclusions.

"Friendship is found in many places - although not my original intent, I would be most willing to be your friend, if you wish?"

Mijbillim do not blush, but Poppet came close, with a trill of happiness in her voice as she spoke. "Oh yes, I do wish, very much. Very very much!"

Data formed a smile, learned reflex of Human relations, perhaps wasted on Poppet, then looked puzzled. "Do you not have friends among the crew?" he asked

"Not really - not since I left Starbase 632 to join the Enterprise. My own cadre were there, and Captain Blyton of course."

"Captain Blyton?"

"The officer who took us through Assimilation and Orientation classes before we were assigned to our Starfleet posts. She was a friend. Well... sort of!"

Filing that for future reference, Data observed the return of Murphy and the now laden servo-unit.

"I have observed that friends often share a larger circle of mutually agreeable acquaintances - I am due to meet my friends in the Ten-Forward bar shortly. Perhaps you would like to join our party?"

"Party? Yes, please!"

Murphy handed Data the padd to sign, straight faced and unsmiling.

"Will there be tea, and crumpets, and fairy cake at this party?" asked Poppet eagerly.

Data opened his mouth, and then closed it slowly. Murphy just concentrated very hard on becoming invisible...

Roughly forty minutes later the odd couple were attracting curious looks as they sat with Geordi and O'Brien in the Ten-Forward lounge. More accurately, Data sat, whilst Poppet leant backwards, supported by her tail which coiled in a functional curve behind her. The Ensign's head swayed from side to side, with the occasional forward bob as she discussed her homeworld with the others at the table. Data was fascinated, Geordi kept smiling in delight, and O'Brien seemed mainly bemused.

Worf entered the room, saw the group, and deliberately took his prune juice to the opposite side of the room, where he sat alternately sipping and scowling.

Sitting on a stool by the bar, Will Riker watched as Poppet took a blue lobster-like

creature from a large sack by her side, nipped it expertly in two and gulped down the contents of the carapace, then tossed the shell onto a growing pile of debris to her left before quaffing a mouthful of liquid from a 2 litre glass stein of dark fluid.

Turning to Deanna Troi, seated beside him, he indicated the tableau with a jerk of his head. "Now that's what I call a prawn cocktail!" he joked.

Deanna smiled at the awfulness of the joke, almost despite herself, but Guinan had overheard the remark and was less amused. Gliding over to refill Riker and Deanna's glasses she spoke to the ship's First Officer.

"Funny. Now if you do the ones about "otter-pilot", "otter-destruct" and "an otter you can't refuse" you will have covered all the obvious ground."

Riker looked into her face, the picture of confused innocence. "Did I say something wrong?"

Guinan snorted in irritation, then spoke slowly, as to an idiot. "Poppet is not an otter, nor is she a cute funny animal of any description - she is a sentient life form, who is very young, very much alone, and very, very far from home."

Riker turned to Deanna, face asking for support, but the Counselor nodded in agreement with Guinan as she spoke. "Poppet is the embodiment of all my concerns about the Federation's Rapid Integration Program - as the Federation expands outward, the surface area of our sphere of influence grows exponentially. The number of species contacted and invited to join the Federation in a year, doubles every five years. More and more of those species are encouraged to send their brightest and best to join Starfleet, to serve as emissaries and as students. Sometimes this means that the best interests of the individual are subsumed for what everyone thinks is the best of reasons. As I say, I have great concerns about the program's effects..."

Riker shook his head, disagreeing with her. "The RIP makes sense... but that's not the point. I didn't mean any insult to Poppet, I just made a joke!"

Guinan muttered to herself in a not particularly sotto voce. "You can't even pronounce her real name, so you give her a 'cute' one!"

Before Riker could respond to the bar's hostess, Deanna chipped in again. "Look at her, Will - see her as a young girl, far from home and trying so desperately to fit in..."

Number One looked at the being in question, who was engaged in picking her teeth with a lobster claw whilst paying rapt attention to Geordi and O'Brien's description of a planet they had spent a shore leave on three months before. The emotions Riker felt were not those he usually experienced at the sight of a lonely young female crew person...

Turning to resume the argument, Riker was prevented from continuing by the sound of a large body slumping to the ground, and by cries of consternation from the lounge area.

Spinning around, he saw that Poppet had keeled over into unconsciousness, knocking table and chairs aside as she went.

Dashing forward, Riker joined Geordi and O'Brien as they watched Data crouch down to examine the supine form. Aware of Worf moving up behind him, Riker asked, "What happened here?"

Geordi shrugged in concerned confusion, and replied. "I don't know - one minute she was fine, having a great time, then she just took a swig of coke and keeled over."

Data stood, having ascertained that Poppet merely seemed to be unconscious. Regarding Geordi, he asked sharply, "The Ensign was drinking coke? Or diet coke?"

"Diet coke," replied Geordi. "You were there, you saw what she ordered."

"Incorrect," said Data. "The Ensign placed her order whilst I was delivering her meal to the table. This is... unfortunate."

Worf growled and pushed forward to face Data. "Are you implying that this... dietcoke... is injurious to her species?"

"Not injurious - not of itself; but in conjunction with certain preservatives on the Dentrassian foodstuffs, for her species it would combine to have a strong... intoxicant effect."

"Intoxicant?" chorussed Geordi, Riker and Worf in perfect three point harmony.

"She's drunk!" said O'Brien, ever one to get to the heart of the matter.

"As a skunk," added Data, happy to supply a fitting metaphor.

As the crewpersons around them began to right overturned chairs and return to their former groups, Guinan and Deanna joined the group around the supine form.

"Is she all right?" asked Deanna.

"Perfectly," responded Data. "She just needs to 'sleep it off'," he added helpfully.

"In that case," said Guinan, "you had better take her to her quarters."

"Her quarters?" echoed Riker confusedly.

"You cannot leave her here, on the floor, can you?" explained Guinan, as to an idiot.

"Oh. No. Of course not!" said Riker, assertively.

Geordi looked at the determined face of the hostess, and abandoned any thought of protest. Dammit, there had been no indication, she'd just seemed to be having a great time...

Data looked at Poppet

"I am strong enough to lift her, but draped over my shoulders her own weight - approximately 500 pounds I believe - might cause internal injury. Possibly I could drag her by the tail, though that also might..."

"Enough!" snarled Worf. "No member of my Security Section will be dragged anywhere. We shall take a limb each, and proceed." Suiting action to words, he bent and took a grip of the harness web on Poppet's shoulder.

Looking vaguely bemused, Geordi, Data and O'Brien took similar grips and managed to raise the ensign a few inches above the deck. Head and tail slumped with equal limpness at either end.

"Your assistance would be appreciated, sir," said Worf to Riker, nodding at the head. Taking a deep breath, Riker placed both hands under Poppet's muzzle and lifted her head to ease her breathing. Not to be outdone, Deanna moved to the stern and lifted the tail tip clear of the floor.

Smiling beatifically Guinan led them to the door, oblivious of the round of applause from the onlookers.

"All it needs now is for the door to open and Captain Picard to walk in," muttered Riker.

The door opened, and Picard walked in.

The shock of the four people carrying her jumping to attention simultaneously was enough to rouse Poppet enough that she opened her eyes and looked at Picard without recognition.

"Party?" she inquired breathily.

No-one spoke, so she closed her eyes and returned to her prior comatose state.

"Sir..." began Riker.

"There is a perfectly logical explanation?" suggested his Captain.

"Yes, sir. Ahhh, of a kind, sir."

"Then you and... the Ensign here... can deliver it to me tomorrow. My ready room, Number One, ten hundred hours."

"Yes, sir."

"Carry on, Number One."

Picard waited until the door closed behind the ensign bearers before he turned to Guinan and smiled. "That is going to take some explaining..."

"Yes, it is!"

The rest of the journey to Poppet's cabin passed in uneventful diplomatic silence, broken only by grunts of exertion and the sound of Riker's teeth grinding.

Data palmed the door open, and they carried Poppet in and heaved her onto the bed. She overlapped on all sides. Standing back, the being on the bed looked out of place in a room built for Humans. Poppet writhed, coiled, curled, and eventually achieved a kind of foetal ball state on the bed. Looking at the fittings, particularly the sonic shower cubicle, Geordi shook his head in vexation.

"The room is all wrong for her!" he exploded. "I'm going to do something about this!"

Before anyone else could speak, Poppet twisted again. A ripple ran through her body. The tail twitched. There was... a noise. There was ...a smell.

Deanna and Geordi gagged.

"What is that...?" managed Riker before his throat closed.

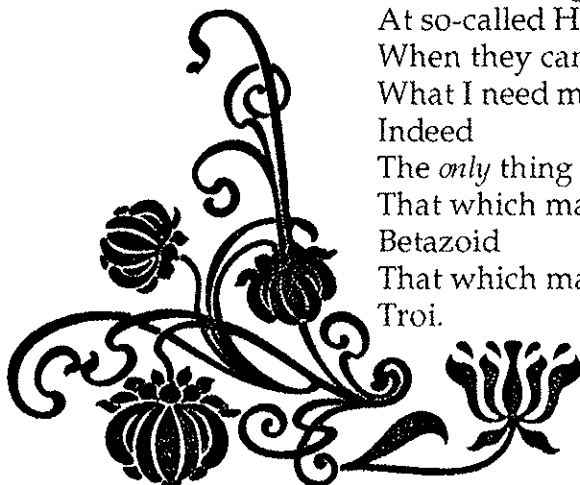
"It appears to be mainly methane, with a number of organic traces," offered Data thoughtfully.

"Gentlemen," said O'Brien from the relative safety of the doorway, "I believe it is time to withdraw - a drunken otter I can face, but a flatulent one is not to be countenanced!!"

Nodding agreement, they fled, leaving Poppet to dreams of water, and family, and home.



I can't feel you!
 How can mere words
 Such as these
Explain what I'm feeling.
 Not to feel!
 Not to sense...
 Experience...
Share
 What is going on inside you,
 Inside everyone *around* me.
 How can you know
 When you *never* knew?
 Now perhaps I never shall again.
 How can I live like this?
 Apart...
 Shut out...
 Banished from your lives,
 From everything
 That has even made *mine*
 What it has been
 Up till now!
 Why can't you *understand*?
 What use are all
 Your fumbling attempts
 At so-called Human comfort
 When they cannot restore
 What I need most of all?
 Indeed
 The *only* thing I value...
 That which makes me
 Betazoid
 That which makes me
 Troi.



Sheryl Peterson

TRIAL BY ERROR

by

Margaret Conner

Captain's log Stardate 41279.6

The Enterprise is en route to the Zirgo Latium system and specifically the planet Nerit VII, which Federation scientists have believed to be lifeless these past five hundred thousand years. However Starfleet has suddenly begun to receive a weak signal on an emergency channel from this planet and we, being the nearest starship, have been sent to investigate. We are, nonetheless, under strict orders to beam nothing down to the surface but to complete extensive long range scans from the ship itself.

Picard stood forward of the con and ops positions, staring at the viewscreen, watching what appeared to be a column of golden light forming between the planet and its sun.

"What do you make of that, Number One?" he asked, turning slightly toward Commander William Riker, who was seated in the chair to the left of the Captain's command seat, while still keeping the viewer in his sight.

Riker approached the viewscreen almost warily. Although he couldn't say why, something about this phenomenon unsettled him. "I've never seen anything like it, sir, but I'd advise shields at maximum." He paused, adding, "Just as a precaution."

"Agreed," the Captain answered, looking past the Commander at Lt Worf who was standing in his customary position at the tactical station. "Make it so."

"Aye, sir," he growled.

As soon as they entered the column of light the red alert klaxon was set off as various systems on the ship failed, the most serious being life support.

"Mr La Forge!" Picard shouted over the noise of the klaxon. "Full impulse power. Get us out of here."

Geordi touched the panel in front of him and the ship sped out into the normal space surrounding the planet.

"As soon as repairs are effected I want a meeting in the Conference Lounge," the Captain announced to the Bridge at large. "Mr La Forge, Chief Argyle could no doubt use your unique talents in Engineering." Geordi nodded and left.

"Number One, Counselor, I'll speak with you both now." He turned and left the bridge with Commander Riker and Counselor Troi close on his heels.

Once Troi and Riker were seated Picard turned from the view of the stars in their majesty. "Counselor, have you sensed anything since we arrived here? After what just happened I would rather not have to rely too heavily on our sensors for any type of warning."

Deanna Troi sat, her hands clasped in her lap, as if deep in thought. "Until we entered the column I could sense very little of anything," she sighed, rather exasperated.

"But that changed?" Riker urged her as she hesitated.

She nodded. "Just before our systems began to scramble I sensed a very strong presence. It lasted for only a few seconds and then disappeared."

Just as she completed her sentence Lt Yar's voice came over the Captain's communicator. "Bridge to Captain."

Picard straightened, tapping his communicator. "Picard here."

"Sir, life-support systems have returned to full capacity..." She trailed off, unsure as to what the Captain's reaction would be to her next statement.

"But what?" Picard asked stiffly, expecting bad news.

"Well, sir, it's just that Mr Argyle couldn't find anything wrong with them - they just resumed of their own accord."

Picard and Riker exchanged puzzled looks. "Very well, Lieutenant, have Mr La Forge bring me a full report as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir. Yar out."

The silence in the Conference Lounge hung thickly until Riker cut it by saying, "It would appear whoever or whatever they are, they want us alive, Captain."

Picard had to agree.

The conference brought forward no solutions, for without any evidence of what they were dealing with there was little they could do. La Forge's report did nothing to allay their fears.

"Most systems repaired themselves, Captain," Geordi announced, continuing, "however, communications, sensors and our engine output have been severely affected."

As they studied the report in front of them it became obvious what Geordi was referring to. Subspace communications were inoperative, while sensors showed massive fluctuations and were highly unreliable. This effectively left them blind and deaf, with no means of contacting Starfleet should it become necessary. They were on their own. But that was not the worst of it. The engines could not produce enough power for them to leave the planet. Although there was no danger of their entering the planet's atmosphere, they were locked tight in a synchronous orbit.

"No matter how hard they study the affected systems our engineers can find no reason for their failure," Riker informed a less than pleased Jean-Luc Picard as they sat alone in the now deserted conference lounge. "It must have something to do with the signal from the planet."

"Agreed, Number One, but what are our options now? We have approximately seventeen minutes until we enter that space again." Picard finished his sentence, clearly deep in thought. "Let's have the affected systems monitored manually. Perhaps we can discover just what we're dealing with."

Riker acknowledged, heading off to Engineering to follow his orders.

"But Number One," the Captain added, catching him in mid-stride, "I want you back on the Bridge before re-entry."

"Aye, sir."

Their second pass through the column of light was less hazardous on the ship's systems, although life-support did short out again for a few seconds. But this was the least of Picard's worries, for they had no sooner entered the affected space than he heard a groan, followed by a slightly higher pitched gasp, from behind him. He turned in time to see Counselor Troi slump in her seat and Commander Riker crumple to the floor, both unconscious.

"Med teams to the bridge," Picard ordered to the air at large, activating the communications link to Sickbay.

"On their way, Captain. What is the nature of the casualties?" Dr Crusher's voice sounded on the bridge.

"Commander Riker and Counselor Troi are both unconscious, the cause of which I expect you to find out, Doctor," came Picard's terse reply.

"Aye, sir. Crusher out."

It was two hours and three hours respectively before Riker and Troi regained consciousness in Sickbay. While Will Riker seemed confused and unable to help them discover the cause of his collapse, Deanna Troi was completely aware of what had happened.

"The cause was a telepathic contact of such strength as I have never encountered before," she informed a worried Captain and a puzzled Doctor. "We had no choice but to pass out. Any sustained contact would have killed both of us," she concluded.

Picard studied his two officers, considering what he had just been told. "I understand their contacting you, Counselor, but why Number One?"

Troi and Riker exchanged glances, her eyes flicking away quickly and his face tinging red.

"It is possible they picked up on my understanding with Commander Riker while in contact with my mind, thus making him more susceptible to their contact."

All the time they had been discussing matters, Beverly Crusher had been completing her tests. As with her original scans, initiated when they were unconscious, she could find nothing wrong. Both officers seemed physically unaffected by the encounter.

"I see no reason why they should not return to their respective posts, Captain," the Doctor informed him, releasing them from the confines of the diagnostic couches. "However, I would like to be present with a med team the next time we encounter that thing." She pointed in the direction of the planet's sun.

"A precautionary measure, I take it, Doctor?"

Crusher merely nodded her agreement.

On returning to the Bridge the pair received welcoming nods from Tasha and Geordi, while curiosity was written all over Data's face.

"I'll tell you later," Riker promised him.

The Bridge was a hive of activity as the personnel still struggled to find what was causing the obstructions to the various systems. La Forge disappeared to sensor maintenance, accompanied by Worf. Both were determined to discover what was inhibiting them. Acting Ensign Wesley Crusher was already in Engineering seeing if he could assist Chiefs Argyle and McDougal in their task of increasing engine output. Meanwhile Data and Tasha were taking the subspace communications apart for the third time. Someone had to come up with something and soon, for they were nearing re-entry again.

As they approached the sun side of the planet again Picard felt more than saw the two people on either side of him stiffen. It was obvious that neither of them was in any hurry to repeat their previous experience and Picard did not blame them.

As on the previous two occasions life-support was again briefly interrupted, but the crew were astonished to see Counselor Troi enveloped in a curtain of opaque energy. Picard noticed a blur of movement in front of him and then he was unceremoniously yanked from his command chair. No sooner had he vacated the space than a tendril of energy reached out toward Commander Riker and formed a second curtain of energy enclosing him. As the ship exited the other side of the column of light both energy curtains disappeared, taking Troi and Riker with them.

The Bridge crew stared in silence. What had happened to their two colleagues? Where were they?

Slowly all systems returned to life.

"Mr La Forge, I appreciated your timely action, but how did you know?" came the Captain's expected question.

"The subliminal portions of the energy field registered visible on my visor. I saw the tendril begin literally seconds before everyone else." He paused. "I just wish I had reached Commander Riker too," he ended disconsolately.

"You would have endangered yourself and Commander Riker if you had, Geordi," Data's voice came from behind them.

Picard turned to face his Second Officer. "How did you come to that conclusion, Mr

Data?"

"While everyone was watching Counselor Troi, I observed the Commander's face pale and his body go rigid. I believe the being who created the energy fields was already in contact with him."

A slight cough from Picard's right distracted him from Data and brought his attention to Dr Crusher.

"He's right, sir. I was monitoring both Counselor Troi and Commander Riker and my readings confirm Lieutenant-Commander Data's observations - although everything happened so quickly there was no time for anyone to react."

Picard had to agree. Angry as he was at the abduction of two of his command crew, taking it out on the rest of them served no purpose.

"Mr Worf, is there any trace of either of them on sen... "

Suddenly his head swam, the room wavered. When everything solidified again he found himself in a small garden area. With him were Lieutenant-Commander Data, Lt Tasha Yar and Lt Geordi La Forge. All looked as unnerved and perplexed as he felt.

He stared around in confusion. "What the... "

Before he could complete the sentence a voice spoke, seeming to come from all directions at the same time.

"Captain Jean-Luc Picard," it began. "If you wish to prevent the destruction of your ship and the death of all your people, both on the planet and aboard the ship, you must find the missing pair."

The Captain looked at each of his officers in turn, as if disbelieving what he had heard.

"Then you are responsible for their disappearance?" he asked, more to give them time to collect their scattered thoughts than asking an actual question.

The ground vibrated softly with a hearty chuckle. "I have just said so, have I not?"

Yar moved toward her Captain anxiously. "But sir, this is a large planet. How are we supposed to even guess at the right direction to take, let alone find them?"

"Fear not, young Tasha," came a younger, gentler voice. "We will give you some assistance and possibly a few clues."

There was a rumbling like the beginnings of an argument. Someone was clearly not pleased at the thought of giving them any help and Picard could guess which one it was.

"But be warned, these few luxuries you are to be given will result in penalties levelled at your absent friends should you err."

The voices stopped as quickly as they had started.

"Let's find out just how helpless we are," Picard stated preparing to activate his communicator.

"Captain," Geordi interrupted him, "I think it would be advisable if we didn't touch anything here," he paused concentrating his gaze on a nearby flower that greatly resembled an Earth rose. "Even you, Data. The readings I'm getting from the flora and fauna around here are really weird and with the power these beings seem to have they could probably cook up something to harm you too, friend."

Data looked extremely perplexed. "Cook up?" he muttered softly. He had no wish to let the Captain hear him as this could possibly be considered babbling. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "A Human colloquialism." He seemed pleased with himself.

"Agreed, Captain," Yar acknowledged. "They have done nothing to instil any faith or trust."

Picard nodded and proceeded to attempt to contact the ship. It was so easy that Picard felt apprehensive. "Lt Worf, ship's status," he ordered.

"All systems appear to be working normally sir," came the Klingon's low bass rumble. "However, we are encased in the column of light. The transporters and sensors are being held inoperative, as is subspace communications."

"Very well, Lieutenant. Keep trying to break free. You have the con until further notice. I shall report in when possible, Picard out."

A wave of nausea and disorientation overcame the Captain and when his vision cleared again he found that they were no longer in the lush green garden but in the burnt orange barrenness of a desert.

Taking a few moments to assimilate this new change of environment Picard was surprised to find that each member of the team had been given a tricorder, rations pack and phaser. But before anyone could react to their good fortune, Data dispelled part of it.

"Captain, my phaser registers less than half power and certain areas of my tricorder programming are non-functional."

Tasha examined her phaser, nodding her head in agreement while Geordi studied his tricorder. Picard's inspection of his own equipment revealed the same verdict.

"Mr La Forge, can you see what's wrong with these tricorders?" he asked hopefully.

"Part of the circuitry has been removed, though I don't know how they managed to leave the rest of the tricorder in working order." The young lieutenant was totally bemused and could offer no explanations on the aliens' accomplishments.

"Sir," Data began attracting his colleagues' attention. "The circuits that have been removed are those which would register humanoid life. They do not intend to make our task an easy one."

Tasha's face reddened in anger. She felt so frustrated. "What is the use of having tricorders if we can't use them to find Commander Riker and Counselor Troi?" As soon as she thought it she realised how stupid she was being. On an alien planet of which they had no working knowledge the tricorders were essential. They were their only means of assessing the safety of the world itself.

One of the original voices, the grumbling, grudging one, sliced through the air. "The

first penalty has been incurred. Ungratefulness will not be tolerated." To Tasha's horror she realised she had been responsible for it.

In front of them a shimmering curtain of energy, similar to those that they had seen on the ship, appeared. As it solidified it became like a viewscreen, on which were displayed the unconscious forms of the two missing Enterprise officers. The four members of the away team watched in fearful silence to see what would transpire.

Riker sat up slowly and gradually focused on his surroundings. The first thing he saw was Deanna Troi, who like himself was also in the process of regaining consciousness. Acknowledging her presence, he began to pace the confines of their cell. It was a small white room. The roof was barely four centimetres higher than the Commander himself; it had four brilliant white walls. There were no windows, and no door. He reached for his communicator, knowing instinctively that it would not be there. He was right. Deanna's was also missing. There was no hope of escape; rescue was their only hope.

As they stood side by side, searching hopefully for the impossible, the walls began to grow brighter, burning into them. Desperately trying to shield their eyes they backed into the centre of the room facing each other, Riker sheltering Troi. Suddenly a high pitched whine began, escalating quickly past the point of endurance. As they collapsed to the floor they prayed for unconsciousness, but if it was going to come it was taking its time.

The sight of them lying on the floor writhing in agony was the last the others had of them as the curtain shimmered once more and disappeared.

Tasha gasped, struggling to fight back tears of anger that were stinging her eyes. "That was my fault. I caused that," she almost sobbed, catching herself in time. "Oh Gods, I was so angry at not being able to use the tricorders to find them! What have I done?"

"Easy, Lieutenant," Picard cautioned, approaching his extremely agitated Chief of Security. "No one has explained the rules to us and we are bound to make a few mistakes." He paused. "However, now we have seen what our mistakes can do, so we must be very careful." The two other officers nodded in agreement.

Picard decided that now would be an appropriate time to check in with the ship and give the others time to gather themselves.

Worf's voice rumbled deeply over Picard's communicator. "No change to ship's status, Captain." He sounded as he would if he were announcing impending doom, which in all reality he could well be doing. "Maintenance crews are working round the clock."

"Very well, Lieutenant, I shall contact you later, Picard out." He hadn't really expected anything different, but he believed in the saying 'Hope springs eternal'.

On the ship Worf was trying very hard not to take his frustration out on those around him. It would have been easier to accept the situation if there had been a visible enemy, someone to attack, but this hide and seek existence was something he struggled to understand.

"Lt Solis, you have the con," he said, heading for the turbolift. "I will be in Engineering if

my presence is required." The doors closed behind his retreating form.

Tasha blinked furiously, trying in vain to shield her face with her arm. A sandstorm of great magnitude had sprung into existence without any preamble or warning. Geordi felt ridiculous. He found himself holding onto Tasha's arm, with Picard and Data attempting to shield him from the sand and trying to prevent as much of it as possible from lodging in his visor.

"We'll have to find some shelter," Picard shouted over the noise of the storm. "We can't survive much longer in this."

"Captain, wait!" Tasha cried. Turning back to Geordi she shouted, "What is it?"

Geordi had stopped dead in his tracks. "Over there," he pointed, adding, "there's something in trouble."

The other three looked in the direction he was pointing. They could just make out the vague image of an animal. It appeared to be running in a blind panic, but either because of the strength of the wind or the violence of the storm it didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

"Geordi," Data began, heading back towards his friend, "the animal is most likely indigenous to this planet and as such is no doubt accustomed to the varying degrees of weather, therefore it should survive. However, were you to try to rescue it you would be courting death." He paused, looking at Tasha. "Did I use that expression correctly?"

She nodded, chuckling softly to herself. It never ceased to amaze her that no matter how desperate or dangerous the situation Data always found time to worry about his use of language and its appropriateness.

Geordi sighed. "Nevertheless, Data, I am still going to try." He started to move towards the animal and stopped. "Unless of course, Captain, you order me not to." From the look of determination on Geordi's face Picard decided it was probably better to allow him to have his own way on this occasion.

"Make it so, Lieutenant. But be careful."

Slowly and steadily Geordi made his way towards the terrified animal, checking his surroundings as he went. It came as no surprise to him that Data was following at a discreet distance, ready to provide backup should the need arise.

As he neared the creature he crouched slightly and began speaking in what he hoped was a calm and reassuring voice, trying to placate the animal lest it attack him. The animal seemed to sense his intent and became more docile as he neared it. Just as he reached down to pick it up there was a ferocious growl piercing through the unabating howl of the sandstorm. Acting instinctively Geordi turned, stunning the approaching animal, which looked like a cross between a sabre-toothed tiger and a grizzly bear, with his phaser. The animal halted abruptly, stumbled, then crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Staggering slightly from the shock Geordi picked up the smaller creature, which purred like an Earth kitten, obligingly retracted its porcupine-like quills and snuggled into the crook of his arm.

"Captain!" Tasha exclaimed. "A cave of some type."

Warily the officers approached the cave. "Sir, there is an opening at the other side. It's more a tunnel than a cave."

"Agreed, sir," Data's voice echoed back to them. "The surrounding terrain appears to be less hostile."

Picard and Geordi hesitantly joined their two colleagues. Data's description had been an understatement. The landscape at the opposite side of the tunnel was more like a veritable Garden of Eden.

"What about the flora and fauna here, Geordi? Any less dangerous?" Picard asked as they inspected the nearest plants and terrain.

"As far as I can see they read well within the normal range."

Picard turned at a vibrating sound behind him. The energy curtain had appeared again.

All four stared as Troi and Riker reappeared. They were still in the white walled room but they seemed more alert than they had previously. Instead of the walls glaring brightly and bare they were more natural looking, and a window had materialized in one wall. There was also a table with food and drink. It was obvious that Geordi's good deed had led to the better treatment. Picard only hoped that it would continue but he was not overly confident that would be the case.

"I wonder if we're near them?" Tasha asked, voicing the question they would have all liked answered.

"Tasha?" Troi's voice was hopeful and querying.

"Deanna, can you see us as well as hear us?" she asked.

"No, I only hear you," Troi answered, springing from her seat next to Riker.

"Number One, check the terrain through the window, see if there are any landmarks."

Riker seemed startled at the mention of a window. Both he and Troi scanned the walls before he answered, "Aye, sir," and moved to comply with his Captain's instructions.

Surveying what he could see from the small window Riker began his report. "The only landmark I can see, Captain, is a large hill beginning to rise some twelve to fourteen metres to my right. The rest of the terrain seems mainly unremarkable, although I think I can hear a river or stream flowing somewhere nearby."

"Enough," a voice rumbled in anger. "The rest you must do yourselves." And with that the energy curtain dissipated and vanished.

Picard looked at the others in frustration. "Before we go any further let's rest a while and I will contact the ship."

"Aye, sir," was his team's only reply. After all it didn't do to disagree with one's Captain, especially when he was angry.

"Picard to Enterprise. Lt Worf, report." After a brief pause Worf's deep resonant voice was heard.

"Worf here, sir. There is very little to report. Lieutenant-Commander Argyle found an anomaly in the warp computer tie-in but was injured during his attempt to correct it."

Data and Geordi exchanged puzzled glances. "Captain, that shouldn't be possible," Geordi informed him.

Picard nodded. "What is his condition?"

"Dr Crusher here," came the familiar feminine tones. "He received third degree burns and a shock of substantial voltage. However I am confident he will make a complete recovery."

The apprehension that had formed around the away team lessened considerably at her words.

"Thank you, Doctor," Picard replied. "Lieutenant, any progress since then?"

"Ensign Crusher and Chief McDougal are still investigating. I will contact you when they complete their assignment."

"Very well. Picard out."

Geordi and Data sat studying the ground covering. From their manner it was obvious something had caught their attention. As Picard observed his officers Tasha joined them, apparently slightly concerned.

"What have you discovered, Geordi?" she asked.

Geordi shook his head and shrugged slightly before answering. "The molecular construction of this... " he hesitated "...grass, for want of a better description, is breaking down."

Now it was Picard's turn to be puzzled. "Breaking down? How is that possible?" he enquired.

"From the readings of my tricorder, it would appear to be an artificial surface," Data began, frowning. "Though why we did not realise it sooner I do not know."

"That's not all, sir," Geordi added. "From what I was able to see through the window of the Commander's and the Counselor's cell, that vegetation was also degenerating."

Picard was not pleased at this information. "That could mean that the little Commander Riker was able to impart may be completely useless to us."

"Not necessarily so, sir," Data stated. "Although the flora and fauna is degenerating the land itself has remained stable."

Tasha understood what Data was saying. "You mean the large hill and the river may still be there."

"Precisely," Data agreed.

While the away team were discussing the planet, Troi and Riker were trying to gain more details of their surroundings in the hope that they would be able to contact the Captain again.

"I can see so very little, Deanna." Riker swung round from the window, frustration evident in his voice and on his face. "Have you been able to sense anything in this place?"

Troi grimaced slightly, as people do when they taste something they dislike. "A lot of what I sense is beyond my comprehension, but I feel no anger or danger." She stopped abruptly, facing Riker. "It's as though whoever is doing this is testing us. They mean us no real harm."

Riker sat on one of the couches with a resounding thud. "Great. Just what we need, another Q."

Troi shook her head emphatically. "They're not like Q," she told him. "This is no game to them, they are serious about their intent, and I sense no mischievousness as I would normally do with Q." She paused, concentrating. "No, they are definitely curious about something."

Riker's brow wrinkled into a puzzled frown. "Curious. About what?" he asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Troi admitted unhappily.

The away team had been following the trail of degenerating vegetation, or at least the most badly affected areas. Geordi had assured them that the area where their friends were being held had been in a greater state of decay than the area where they were themselves. The logical course had been to follow the decay.

"Lt La Forge, can you see any sign of the terrain Commander Riker described?"

With his visor Geordi was able to see considerably greater distances than the rest of the team.

"About seventy metres ahead, sir, the ground begins to rise. That could lead us to the hill that Commander Riker was referring to," Geordi began. "As to the stream, I'll have to wait until we get closer."

Data stopped abruptly, turning to stare into a small group of trees off to their right.

"Sir, I believe we are being followed."

Picard turned and signalled for Tasha and Data to go and search the area. There was no point in asking Data if he were certain, he would not have spoken up if he were not.

There was a high-pitched scream and thrashing sounds from among the trees, then the two officers returned with Data carrying what appeared to be a small humanoid child. The child struggled furiously but with little hope of escaping. Of course there was no way she could know of Data's remarkably superior strength.

Oh no, Picard thought. *It has to be a child and not an adult.* Picard had always felt out of his depth with children and had been grateful for Riker's help in dealing with them, but of course

Riker wasn't here. He was more than a little relieved when Tasha began to talk to the child, trying to coax her into answering.

"It's all right," she said, crouching down so that she was on eye level with the young girl. "No one is going to hurt you." Had Data not been holding her, the girl would have succeeded in her attempt to dart back into the woods.

"Where did you come from?" Tasha tried hopefully. Her only answer was a sullen, suspicious look.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, holding out the remains of her food ration.

The girl looked at the proffered food curiously, but it was obvious that she did not trust them enough to accept the offer.

With exaggerated movements Tasha dipped her hand into the packet, took out one of the wafers and slowly began eating, deliberately showing how enjoyable it was. The second time she held out the packet to the little girl it was snatched from her hand and devoured greedily. The child was starving.

"Mr Data, have you any idea where this child has materialized from?" Picard asked.

"This child could be part of another test, sir," Data began. "As far as we know there are no life-readings on this planet."

Picard nodded his agreement. Hearing the child break into a slight chuckle he turned to see the small creature that Geordi had saved playing with the empty ration packet.

"Regardless of where she came from we can't leave her behind," Tasha stated almost angrily.

"That was never my intention, Lieutenant," Picard retorted. "The child will accompany us and share our remaining rations."

At the sound of his authoritative tones both the child and the animal seemed to gravitate toward him. *Brilliant*, he thought. *This is all I need.*

Troi had begun to drift into a comfortable sleep when she jerked awake exclaiming, "Bill!"

Riker rushed to her side. "What is it? What's wrong Deanna?"

Struggling to calm herself she replied, "They are curious about us; about how we have developed this far without their knowing."

Riker had been finding the confinement hard on his nerves but now his frustration began to turn to anger. "This is just like Q all over again. Why can't these so-called superior beings just sit down and talk with us?" He stormed around the room testing various parts of the walls. "If they'd only *ask* we could provide all the answers they need!" Turning toward the window he began to examine it closely. "There has to be a way to get out of here. I won't be held hostage against the Captain." He found a small catch near the base of the frame. Picking up an eating implement they had been left he began to prise at the lock. Suddenly there was a

bright flash and Riker was enclosed in a blue field of light. He screamed and lurched back from the window. Jerking convulsively he collapsed to the floor unconscious.

"Bill!" Deanna exclaimed, darting to his side, her face pale with shock and her body shaking with anger. "What have you done to him?" she asked the air at large, struggling to conceal her own anger.

A voice boomed, appearing to generate near the ceiling. "Escape must be discouraged. Being discovered by your Captain is your only way out."

"Why did you take both of us, why not just me?" she asked suspiciously.

"Our mind probe revealed how strongly you were both linked. Taking one or the other of you would have made it too easy for the others to find you," came the well deliberated reply.

Troi was becoming curious, but Riker's condition still concerned her. "Why not take someone else then?"

The voice was getting impatient, maybe even a little bored. "On this planet your talents would have been too great an advantage."

Troi was crushed and anguished. "Then Bill's presence here is all my fault," she whispered almost to herself, slumping down.

"We grow tired of your weak self-pitying prattle," it said as if in way of terminating the conversation.

"Wait!" she cried anxiously. "What of my companion, he's hurt?"

There was a hearty chuckle. "Fear not, he will regain consciousness soon."

Then there was only silence as Troi knelt cradling the head of the recumbent Riker.

Picard felt as though they had been walking for days when in fact it had only been a few hours. True to form, the child had tired after the first few metres and Data was now carrying her so she didn't delay them.

"Captain," Data said, turning toward his commanding officer, "I am somewhat puzzled. The beings said that each mistake we made would be punished and each improvement rewarded." His pale face had begun to take on a rather perplexed look.

"Yes, Mr Data, that is correct, so what puzzles you?" Picard asked with supreme patience.

"How can we know if what we regard as mistakes and improvements are the same as they do?"

Picard stopped. Data did have a point. Troi and Riker had been punished for Tasha's ungratefulness, which to him had seemed like a typical angry reaction. Geordi's actions, on the other hand, had merited reward. Yet at the time it had seemed foolish, for they had found no signs of life on this planet, animal or otherwise. Now, as they struggled along sharing their meagre rations with the young child and the animal, they had heard neither one way or the

other about how their latest actions had affected their missing comrades.

"Fear not, Captain," the voice came, startling all of them. "Your efforts have not gone unnoticed and your officers are quite safe." It paused. "For the moment, at least."

Picard looked around for some hint or clue of a presence, but he could see nothing, other than the rotting vegetation, the grass turning from a deep emerald green through varying shades until it dulled to a brown mass of mulch-like material.

The flowers too were dying at a faster rate, budding, bursting into bloom and then wilting, dying as their petals cascaded down onto the putrefying ground.

"What do you want of us?" he snapped in anger and exasperation. "You sent out a message knowing we would come and now you trap us here to taunt, tease and torture us." All too soon he realised that he had been manoeuvred into a classic show of temper.

"Yes, Captain," came the infuriating and worrying reply. "Anger is not something we appreciate. But then should they survive you can always apologise to Riker and Troi."

The shimmering curtain reappeared, solidifying in front of where he stood. All he could do was stand and watch helplessly, knowing he had caused it and could do nothing to stop it.

"Captain, what's happening?" Tasha demanded jumping to her feet and running to his side.

"One of these days I shall learn to curb my damn temper," he muttered. But he had said it loud enough for Tasha to hear and she knew exactly how he felt.

Riker blinked his eyes and opened them to stare into the beautiful features of Deanna Troi.

"I guess fussing with the window lock wasn't the brightest thing I could have done?" he said, a rueful smile spreading across his face.

Troi breathed a sigh of relief. Although the beings had assured her he would be all right and she'd sensed they were telling her the truth, when it came down to it she did not trust them.

Even as they both began to relax Troi sensed a change. Something was happening. The couches disappeared, as did the food and water. The light in the room was rapidly fading. It wasn't long before she couldn't even see Riker, although she knew he was sitting right beside her. As if to contradict her senses, she suddenly found she couldn't feel his arm any more. Struggling to remain calm she shouted loudly, "Bill!" But there was nothing, not even the sound of her own voice. She felt totally alone.

Sensory deprivation, Riker thought as he too tried to remain in control. Knowing what was happening didn't help that much. Who knew how long these beings could keep it up? Though he knew it would not work he still couldn't stop himself. "Deanna!"

Picard and the rest of the away team stood staring. When the light had diminished they

could no longer see what was going on, but they could clearly hear the anguished cries of their two friends.

"Stop this!" Picard cried. "You'll destroy them. Humanoids, particularly Betazoids, cannot tolerate these conditions for any length of time."

The low rumbling chuckle that followed sounded cruel and heartless. "But this is the result of your own actions, Picard. Tread more carefully." As the voice ceased the energy curtain disappeared.

Picard stood motionless, trying desperately not to even think in anger but it was very difficult. Each time the energy curtain vanished they were left to wonder about the condition of the missing pair.

"Surely you can tell their anguish is genuine," came the gentler voice.

There was a prolonged pause before the other answered. "Very well. Their penalty for this crime is over, but be warned - I shall not be so lenient again."

Three of the away team gave an almost collective sigh of relief, Data merely watched. Although he could perceive why they had been so distraught it disturbed him that he could not actually share it. Tasha looked at him then quickly turned away, lowering her head lest he see her smiling, for although Data believed himself incapable of showing any sign of relief, that small half smile that was so uniquely his twitched at his lips.

Returning to more serious matters she said, "I suggest we get under way, sir." Picard was only happy to agree. They were all anxious to continue their search and find Troi and Riker.

Ahead was a wooded area. Instead of the majestic sight a forest would normally create it was a seething mass of rotting timber. Picard was not particularly excited at the prospect of passing through the unstable trees, but it seemed the proper course to take as the decay was much more advanced in that area.

"Lead the way, Lieutenant," he acknowledged.

Back on the Enterprise, Wesley had discovered something interesting.

"According to the limited information our sensors have been able to garner there appears to be a power source generating from just behind this system's sun, sir."

At last, though Worf. A visible enemy.

"Is there a way to disarm this power source?" he rumbled in his usual tone.

Wesley studied the display, attempting to plot various routes for any of their weapons to strike at the source. His expression of disappointment was an easy one to read.

"Not from our present position, sir," he answered with a heavy sigh. "If only the sun was a little more to our left it would be reachable," he concluded, disheartened.

As they headed through the trees Picard noted that the child, who was wailing again, seemed to be always just a few steps ahead of him and was continually checking as if to make sure he was there. He couldn't understand why. Of all of them he had had the least contact with her. If she was going to attach herself to anyone he had thought it would be Tasha, who helped her over the various fallen twigs and littered debris, constantly monitoring her progress. He gave a harump of exasperation; he would never understand children.

There was suddenly a creaking, wood-splitting sound and one of the trees began to topple in the direction of the young child. Picard dashed forward, pushing her to safety, but as he did so he was slashed across the head and back by the flailing branches. He lay there motionless, stunned beyond movement.

"Sir!" Tasha exclaimed rushing towards him, closely followed by Geordi and Data, who had been slightly ahead of them checking the route they were intending to take. "Captain, are you conscious?" Slowly, and with a great deal of effort, Picard managed to roll onto his side and look up into the concerned and peering faces of his officers.

"Yes, Lieutenant, I am," he managed to utter through tightly clenched teeth. "However I fear I shall be unable to complete our little outing."

Tasha forced him back onto his stomach so that she could examine the damage the tree had done. What she saw did nothing to ease the situation. The head wounds seemed slight and superficial, although they still needed cleaning. It was the back injuries which concerned her more. Although the material their uniforms were made of was supposed to be all but indestructible, the branches of the tree had managed to slice long rips in it and some minute pieces of foliage had become embedded in the lacerations themselves.

"Data, is there any water left in the ration packs?" she asked, trying to sound calmer than she actually felt.

Data noted the true reaction on Tasha's face and hurriedly checked. He knew she would not be pleased by his findings. "Cleansing the Captain's wounds will require more water than we have," he whispered for only her to hear, concern rippling his forehead as he handed the water to her.

Despite Data's whispering Geordi managed to overhear and he couldn't help the small smile that tugged at his mouth. Data was getting to know them better than any of them realised, including Data himself. Even though it would finish the water ration he knew they would insist on administering to the Captain's wounds. It was neither rational nor logical, just Human, and Data understood it even if he didn't realise it. Yet.

As Tasha cleansed the Captain's wounds the young girl stood watching every move. Seeing the water run out she quickly circled the group, tugged at Geordi's sleeve and ran off on a tangent to the course they had been following.

"No! Stop!" Geordi shouted, but she continued on her way, pausing only once to motion for him to follow her.

Noticing the indecision Data signalled for Geordi to go after the child, indicating he would remain and assist Tasha.

Though tired and weak in appearance the little girl was remarkably fast on her feet, and at first Geordi found it quite difficult to keep up with her as she dodged in and out of the trees, jumping over fallen debris. Then as he closed in on her he could hear what she was heading

for - a stream.

"Wait!" he shouted. "I understand now." Tapping his communicator he said, "Data, bring the Captain and Tasha the same way you saw us leave. The child has found a stream," he paused adding, "and Data, I think it might be the one Commander Riker was talking about."

"Acknowledged, Geordi," came the concise reply. "We are on our way."

A few moments later Tasha and Data arrived, the latter carrying the now unconscious Picard. Seeing the apprehension on Geordi's face Tasha reassured him.

"He's all right, Geordi. All the movement reopened some of his wounds; he's just fainted."

As they reached the stream and stopped to fill their water bottles, Data noticed the hill. There was no grass or any type of flora left on it, only a large mound of solid earth.

Before he could even consider alerting the others the gentle voice echoed. "There is no hurry Data. Your friends are safe."

Data looked around startled. Even though the beings had proved they could read the intent of the other members of the team he had not considered the fact that they might be able to read his.

"Tend to your Captain," the gentle voice continued. "Then we shall reward you for his bravery," it concluded, and then there was only silence in the air.

True to their word, once the team had rested and cleansed Picard's wounds the beings transported them to almost outside the cell containing their missing crew members. The team began to relax, but their reaction was to prove too hasty.

"Lieutenant!" Wesley exclaimed as the image on the viewscreen showed the ship had begun to move out of the column of light, although it was still having a destabilising effect on the ship itself. "We appear to be moving again."

"Are any of the planned paths for our weapons available to us?" Worf questioned in return, straining forward in the Captain's chair as if he could physically hit the power source itself.

"Yes, sir!" Wesley acknowledged. "Path Delta eight."

"Ensign, lay in course and fire photon torpedoes," the Klingon Lieutenant ordered.

"Firing," came the young woman's response from the tactical station as the torpedoes became visible on the forward viewscreen.

The torpedoes detonated, followed by an orange-yellow flare so bright that the screen backed all the way down to black.

"Open hailing frequencies to the planet," Worf ordered.

"Sir, there is no response," came the surprised reply.

Then the lights went out and they were left sitting in the dark wondering what had gone wrong.

Down on the planet Data and Geordi were trying to find the access code that would give them entry into the cell and free their friends. Suddenly there was a loud explosion in the sky and everything started to go dark, as if night were coming early.

"Geordi!" Tasha exclaimed pointing at the cell. "Something's wrong in there. Something's happening."

Indeed something was wrong. All during their captivity, despite the various consequences, there had been one constant. The temperature. Now the room was suddenly becoming very cold.

As Troi and Riker huddled together to try and keep warm they could see ice begin to form on the window. Their every breath created wisps of smoke as the temperature dropped rapidly and white patches of frost began to glisten in their hair.

"Hurry, Geordi, hurry!" Tasha shouted. "They're freezing in there."

Finally they heard the beep-beep noise which announced their success, but just as they burst into the room Troi and Riker disappeared. As the group stood in stunned silence the young child screamed. Turning they saw the girl hugging the animal tightly and pointing to where they had left the Captain resting. The Captain had vanished as mysteriously as the Commander and Counselor Troi.

"What the hell is going on here?" Geordi mumbled in frustration.

Before anyone could answer him the planet shimmered in its familiar fashion and they found themselves back on the bridge of the Enterprise.

"Computer, are the Captain, Commander Riker and Counselor Troi on board?" Geordi asked as his head cleared.

"Yes, they are in Sickbay," came the calm concise answer from the computer.

"Fear not, Lt La Forge," came the gentle voice. "We transported your colleagues when we realised that we could not help them."

Tasha looked around restlessly. "The child and the animal, where are they?"

"Do not fret so, Tasha," the familiar voice answered yet again. "They were beings of our own creation meant only as a test."

"Bridge to Sickbay. Are our people all right?" Data asked activating the communications link to Sickbay.

"Crusher here. At first glance they appear to be. I'll let you know after I've given them a thorough examination."

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A few hours later an exhausted Riker and Troi were visited in Sickbay by a newly recovered Captain Picard and a satisfied Doctor Crusher.

"Well, Number One, Counselor, the good Doctor tells me that you will both make a full recovery," the Captain informed them.

Troi just nodded, still too tired to participate in any lengthy conversation. Her empathic abilities had told her as much when she first regained consciousness, although she had been astonished to find herself and Riker in Sickbay with Beverly Crusher bending over her.

"Captain, did they ever give a reason why they did all that?" Riker asked, his curiosity getting the better of his fatigue.

Picard smiled. "As a matter of fact, they did. Apparently they are from a star system relatively close to this one and when they discovered we had begun to colonise planets so close to them they wanted to test what like we were."

"Kind of 'see what the new neighbours are like'," Crusher added.

Riker shook his head in disgust. "It's just like I said before, why can't they just talk to us? Why all these tests?"

"They are empathic and telepathic," Troi said as the realisation suddenly dawned on her somewhat clouded mind.

"Exactly," Picard stated. "They are easily affected by the emotional emanations and thought processes of any life forms near them, so they had to be absolutely certain we would not upset their harmony."

Riker settled back on his bed. Their ordeal was finally over, for if they were still alive they must have passed the tests.

"But sir, how did we get back on board the ship?" he heard Troi ask and forced himself to stay awake long enough to hear the answer.

"They sent us here. Apparently they became worried when they saw how badly you were affected by the cold. Their planet's lowest ever recorded temperature is the equivalent of nineteen degrees celsius. They didn't know how to reverse the effects so they sent you to Doctor Crusher," he concluded.

Crusher looked from the now sleeping forms of Troi and Riker to Picard as he stood watching them. "I'll have my staff monitoring their condition for the next twenty-four hours," she informed him. Picard nodded his head in agreement.

"And you, Jean-Luc. You may have been released from Sickbay, but you were ordered to your quarters to rest."

Picard began to protest, but seeing the look of concern and determination on the Doctor's face he quietly acquiesced. After all, Data was more than capable of running the ship for the next forty-eight hours and they all had some well-deserved shore leave to enjoy at Starbase 128. "Very well, Doctor, this time you win." And with that retort he beat a hasty retreat from the room before she could think if anything sarcastic to say.

The Enterprise coasted majestically on her way.



YIN 'ETLH, HEGH 'ETLH

Live by the sword, Die by the sword

by

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First Officer's Personal Log, U.S.S. Enterprise: Captain Picard and Lt. Worf have now been absent for three days, being debriefed at Starbase 89. Whatever happened on the Klingon home world has had ramifications clear to the Federation itself. In their absence the Enterprise has continued with its assigned mission, moving urgently needed medical supplies to Rostov III. It has been very quiet - too quiet.

Jean-Luc Picard moved with remarkable swiftness through the corridors of Starbase 89, his Klingon Security Officer striding easily alongside him. The Enterprise Captain's colour was still high.

They turned into the departure area of the dock assigned to the Freighter Lauris. Arrangements had been made with the Captain of the vessel to carry the pair to a rendezvous with the Enterprise, which would otherwise be obliged to make a detour of many days in order to pick them up.

The Lauris was on its way to the Biltani system, laden with trade goods for the newly recognised members of its two populated sister worlds: Ronii and Carasajj.

The Captain of the Lauris greeted them at the walkway and escorted them aboard.

Philan Cordas was a portly, middle-aged Centaurian used to doing things his own way and getting them done with a tiny crew and a minimum of fuss. They went straight to the Bridge, a small, cramped affair which Worf viewed with contempt.

Their departure was achieved with a minimum of haste and a casualness which impressed neither Starfleet Officer. Once clear of the Starbase Picard turned to his host.

"Captain Cordas, we have had a very long and trying day. If we could be shown to our quarters?"

Cordas immediately looked flustered. "Of course, Captain. You have only to ask. Bariss, show the Captain and Lt. Worf to their quarters."

A young Andorian woman rose from the communications console and preceded them into the turbolift.

They were quartered in small passenger cabins on the rarely used civilian transit deck. It was deserted. When Bariss had departed Worf went to the small viewport in the Captain's quarters and looked out at the stars, still peacefully unaffected by warp drive distortion.

Picard watched him, the Klingon's silent vulnerability fanning his own frustration at everything that had happened to them in the last few days into a flame of anger.

"One day," he told Worf with conviction, "your name will be cleared. The High Council has a great deal to answer for - and as for the Federation - !"

Worf spoke without turning. "I must bear my Discommendation alone. The politics do not concern me. Still, they should not have censured you for standing as my chah'DIch. What was necessary was done. The peace between the Federation and the Empire has been preserved."

"That it has," muttered Picard, searching the half-turned alien profile for any sign of stress. Worf had undergone the most harrowing experience a Klingon could face and there was no way he could reach him. The Klingon's powerful features revealed no sign of his inner turmoil.

Picard sighed heavily. "Worf."

"Sir?"

"What you have done will not be forgotten. Not for as long as I live, nor for as long your children, or your brother's children live," he reminded him softly.

"A Human... cannot understand my dishonour," Worf said, turning slowly.

"Really?" Picard's voice was patient. "It is perhaps difficult for me, as a mere Human, to understand the Klingon psyche but I would have thought that the fact that we are friends - that I was present at those proceedings - would allow me some modicum of insight - "

"Yes," Worf interrupted brusquely, "sir. Your... point... is well taken."

"Good," Picard told him in the same patient tone. "Now, after the arrant hypocritical nonsense we have had to listen to for the last three days, I suggest we both take the opportunity to catch up on some much needed rest."

"You have not slept?" Worf said with every appearance of genuine surprise.

"No more than you have, Lieutenant," he pointed out drily.

"Aye, sir," Worf conceded, wheeled silently, and departed.

A dejected Jean-Luc Picard turned to the viewport with its tiny vista of stars, and heartily wished himself back aboard the Enterprise.

Eight hours out from the Starbase the Lauris' First Mate woke his Captain from a sound slumber.

"Captain Kordas, we have an unknown vessel approaching. It does not answer our hails."

There was a long silence, followed by an unsavoury bout of throat clearing.

"All right, Ben, I'll be up there shortly. In the meantime try to identify the damn thing. Where are our guests?"

"In their quarters, sir."

"Good. Kordas out."

Abram Ben-Issachar muttered something in Yiddish about fat, flatulent old men and their relationship to certain anatomical regions, and gave the appropriate orders. In his opinion the best people to have on the Bridge were the Enterprise Captain and his Lieutenant. At least they would have a chance of identifying the strange ship growing momentarily on the viewscreen.

"Anything yet, Bariss?" he asked the Communications Operator for the third time.

She turned. "Nothing," she lisped.

"Ed?"

The Helmsman-cum-Navigator-cum-Science Officer looked up from his viewer shaking his head.

"Nothing showing on the computer records yet. It's maybe a one off - y'know, a rebuild, a pirate -"

Ben snorted. "There hasn't been one in this sector for years."

"Orion Pirates?" opined the youthful Bariss, for whom the colourful stories of yore remained a vivid childhood memory.

"There hasn't been an incident in three decades," he told her.

Captain Kordas stepped out of the turbolift. Without bothering with the formalities Ben-Issachar immediately threw himself into the empty Navigator's seat and took over the computer search from Ed Brown.

"Report, Ben?"

"We still don't know anything about it, Captain."

"Ed?"

"Unidentified vessel now increasing to warp six. It's on an intercept course," reported Brown.

"Increase to warp three. Evasive manoeuvres. Sound the Evac' alert."

Jean-Luc Picard sat up, startled, listening to clangour of klaxons and bells.

As he slid out of bed and reached for his uniform, two things happened: Worf entered his room without waiting for a response to his page, and the whole ship rocked from what could only have been a direct assault.

Within minutes they had reached the bridge. The turbolift refused to open.

"Deck two," snapped Picard after the third attempt. The lift began to move but there was no response from the ship's computer.

A few nondescript crew people were still moving to their evacuation positions as Picard and Worf raced along the corridors of deck two to the emergency escape conduit.

The climb was mercifully short, but the result was the same. The Bridge was sealed. They slid back down the conduit ladder rails in turn. Picard raced to the nearest comm' panel when they reached the bottom, Worf at his shoulder.

"Picard to Bridge."

Silence.

"Picard to Bridge. Answer!" he commanded, frustrated.

Silence.

"Computer, report on status of the main Bridge," Worf directed.

Silence...

The ship lurched again. A red alert began to sound.

"Sir, there can be only one explanation," Worf said quickly. "The Bridge has taken a direct hit."

"Agreed. The question is why. Why attack a freighter, and in Federation space?" huffed Picard as they doubled back to their quarters. The corridors were empty. "We have to find some weapons," he said, as the door closed behind him. "I don't even know where to begin looking for phasers on a vessel like this."

Worf appeared to be make a decision. "Sir..." He spoke reluctantly. "I... am carrying weapons."

"I gave no such order," Picard was surprised into retorting.

"A Klingon is never defenceless. A Security Officer must be ready to fight - to protect - at all times," rumbled Worf.

Picard's brow remained furrowed. "We will talk about this later," he said meaningfully. "Show me what you have."

Worf's boots, the waistband of his jacket, his sash and even a sheath strapped to his back beneath his tunic all yielded deadly bounty. When he had finished they were equipped with a ceremonial knife, a stiletto-like, flexible dagger and a tiny phaser one, the casing of which had been secreted in halves in the heels of his boots.

Picard shook his head in amazement. "There is a great deal to be said for Klingon ingenuity," he conceded as they stood up. "There is also a great deal to be said for regulations," he added meaningfully.

"Aye, sir," Worf replied sourly.

"Now, our options. Since the Bridge is inaccessible, do we make our way to the main storage area, and presumably meet our attackers head on? Do we go to Engineering to make some kind of defence of the ship? Or do we abandon ship, as the crew seems to have done. Opinion, Mr. Worf?"

"The logical course of action is to go to Engineering, sir. We do not know the size or strength of the enemy. We also have no way of knowing whether or not a distress signal was sent before the attack. To abandon ship in an escape module of the design carried by this ship is not an alternative... "

"Engineering it is," agreed Picard, already moving.

He followed Worf through the corridors of deck two with all the stealth and grace of his own Security years, covering the big Klingon with the makeshift phaser as Worf carefully guided them back to the conduit which also ran the depth of the hull as an emergency exit from any deck.

Worf did not wait to be asked before taking the point for the climb down. Picard followed without comment. It took some time to descend the three decks to the first hold, to the rear of which was the main Engineering section.

Worf motioned Picard to wait as he reached the deck marker. Below, the conduit opened onto the smaller storage area and vulnerability. For a long time he was very still, save for the occasional flaring of his nostrils and the tilting, almost imperceptibly, of his head to sounds that the Captain could not possibly pick up.

Without warning he began to move, a hand again raised to warn Picard not to descend. Then the Klingon was gone, in silence.

Long, tense minutes passed without sound or movement. After a seemingly interminable time, Picard decided that he would wait no longer.

Worf's head reappeared at the bottom of the rungs just as he started to move. "Captain, the area is now secure," he reported, an imposing figure, even when looking up from six metres down.

Picard had only descended about a metre when he saw the Klingon spin around defensively. Trouble. Immediately Picard wrapped his feet around the hand rails to slide.

"No!" roared the Klingon as the whine of an unfamiliar phaser accompanied a brilliant flash, but it was too late. Picard crashed onto the deck, his arm twisted brutally behind his back, his head bouncing sickeningly on the hard metal surface.

Worf rolled, then zigzagged across the hold toward their attackers.

The two grey skinned aliens fired repeatedly at the moving target, but Worf was being carried forward by an explosion of adrenalin and rage.

They were barely inside the big doors when he reached them.

Worf had knocked the blaster out of the hand of one and broken the other's neck before he realised that they were of no race he had ever encountered before. He turned, death

flashing in his eyes, to the survivor, who cowered, then made a break for the door. Worf moved. The diminutive alien seemed to rise in the air, almost in slow motion, a hissing grunt escaping from his lips as he fell to the deck, dead, Worf's ceremonial dagger protruding from the base of his neck.

After retrieving the weapon and making a swift visual scan of the gangway outside the doors, Worf raced back to the Captain.

Picard was alive, but unconscious. There was a large hole surrounded by a blackened blast radius in the bulkhead next to the rungs he'd been caught on.

One side of the Captain's face, part of his uniform and his left hand and sleeve were burned. Worf recognised the pattern of the wounds. A Klingon disruptor.

He muttered a very long and complex Klingon oath. The arm was badly broken. Worf gingerly ran a hand down the Human's legs and found no fractures.

Blood had begun to pool on the floor beneath Picard's head. If Worf knew anything, it was that Human heads were notoriously soft. He went cold inside. If the Captain's brain was damaged...

He fingered his dagger with the Klingon equivalent of panic as he searched his memory for the lessons from his Academy days in basic first aid and Human anatomy.

The back. If the back was damaged movement could be fatal.

He felt for the Human's pulse again. Rapid and weak. He looked around for cover. Few pallets of cargo remained in the hold. The aliens had worked quickly.

Worf concealed the Captain by stacking empty containers around him before setting off to find a Sickbay, or at least a Med' station - and to ascertain their status. He ran from one hold to the other. They were all empty and deserted. His mind was working on two levels: hunt and destroy, and somewhere, niggling at his warrior mindset, was a tormenting thought: Picard could die.

Worf risked the turbolift to get to deck two where the crew and civilian quarters, recreation area and amenities were, his mind running the plans of the ship that he'd routinely studied before boarding. He flattened himself against the side of the lift when it halted and trained one of the phasers he had taken from the aliens on the doors. They opened onto a deserted corridor. Patience exhausted, he set personal safety aside and sprinted to the recreation and mess area. There was one room off it.

The tiny Medical station was well equipped and set up for a doctorless ship. The intruders had obviously not yet reached this deck. Armed with one of the medikits, a tricorder, and a dermolaser, he made his way just as swiftly back to the conduit.

It was still safer, and it led directly to Picard. Holding on to the handrail with one hand, he wrapped his boots around the outside and slid, the instruments clamped in the crook of the other great arm.

He did not pause when he reached the hold this time, sliding straight to the bottom and racing to the side of the inert Human.

Still alive... Awkwardly, the Klingon ran the tricorder sensor over Picard. He did not

understand many of the readings, but blood pressure, pulse, respiratory rate and a number of trauma readings were displayed so that any user could decipher them.

Picard's back was not broken, nor were there any minor vertebral fractures. The arm was very bad, a compound fracture complete with protruding ulna and accompanying gore. There was also severe concussion and a hairline fracture of the skull.

Worf swore, this time in the florid military language his Terran father had never learned not to use in front of his sons. He turned the head very gently and used the dermolaser to seal the scalp wound from which blood still spilled. It was little more than a long split in the skin where the skull had impacted with the floor, but it still bled furiously.

The superficial repair was quickly done. Beneath, Worf knew, lay trouble beyond his control: the fracture, the concussion and worst of all, indication of trauma to the lower region of the occipital lobe of the brain. He lifted one of Picard's eyelids, then the other. The pupils were equal and reactive.

Something, at least, Worf thought darkly, studying the Human's paste-white face and cyanotic lips. He found and administered something for the shock, an antibiotic and a strong painkiller, then drew a small square from the medikit and unfolded it until it was a full sized thermal cover and wrapped it about the Captain's body.

There was a movement, and the scent of... what? Worf rose to a crouching position behind the containers. Three of the aliens were dragging their companions away. When they were clear of the door he followed and leaned carefully into the corridor, just in time to see the strange shimmer of their transporter beam as they vanished. He raced to the third hold and the cargo transporter.

Worf's hands moved rapidly over the console. It was still working, mercifully isolated from the ship's main computer for safety reasons. Sensors revealed a smallish, strange ship of no known origin, yet composed of components and materials of easily identifiable design.

"Pirates!" he hissed aloud, recognising the cannibalised vessel for a well known trademark. The ship was pulling away, apparently uninterested in the reason for their companions' fate.

"Cowards!" Worf muttered as it jumped into warp.

He changed to intraship sensors, and confirmed his worst fears. The Bridge had been completely destroyed, sealed less than a millisecond after its hull was breached, by the ship's computer - its last fully functional act. Now all that remained were the life support backups and overrides. The engine room had been hit. No escape module remained. The remaining complement of twenty crew had abandoned ship during the attack.

"Cowards!" growled Worf a second time and switched to external to scan for the modules, whose top speed was just under full impulse. The pirates had not bothered with them. He located them in formation, on course for Omicron Nu, the nearest populated planet. It would take them months.

The turbolift doors opened at deck two and the big Klingon, the crumpled Human in his arms, strode purposefully down the corridor to the living quarters.

Once he had settled Picard on the bunk, Worf ran the tricorder over him again before backing away, as if momentarily intimidated by the gravity of the situation.

Picard's colour had improved slightly. The medication had banished the encroaching cyanosis, but his over-all condition was critical. The Captain was near death.

Worf did not know what to do about the arm which, while no longer bleeding much, was going to be a source of considerable pain should Picard wake. Nor did he know enough about head injuries or shock to even attempt to stabilise him properly.

It was the head injury that played on Worf's mind as he regained his composure and came back to sit with the Human.

Worf looked down and started, a muttered oath alerting a now conscious Picard to his presence.

"Worf?"

The Klingon exhaled loudly. Picard's pallor and open, unblinking eyes had momentarily given him the appearance of death.

"Sir?"

"Worf, I cannot see you. Have we lost power?"

Worf's rich colour turned to ash. "No, sir. You have sustained an injury to the brain," he said with the merest hint of strain in his voice.

"That would explain... the massive headache. For a moment I thought... our friend Bok was back... again," said Picard with difficulty, his voice a thread of its usual self. "I seem to be rather extensively... damaged," he added haltingly.

"You must lie still," Worf told him. "There are more painkillers. I believe I have controlled the shock, but I am not a Doctor."

"Worf," Picard repeated, "I'm blind."

"Yes... sir." There was a long silence. Worf looked down at the dying Human, his emotions flashing in his eyes. The Enterprise was going to be too late.

In Picard's place a Klingon would expect to die as a warrior cut down in battle, not a whimpering death in bed.

Picard deserved that much. No, he deserved more. Worf drew the ceremonial blade, fingering it with almost hypnotic intensity before sliding his fingers around the hilt. He looked down again, teeth clamped together, eyes burning with the intensity of his emotions.

Slowly, purposefully, he raised the blade. The arm tensed, the muscles contracted, then froze, poised in mid air.

"Yin 'etlh, hegh 'etlh..." Worf said with slow deliberation.

"What?" Picard struggled to move his head.

The arm wavered. Then, suddenly, it trembled. A moment later, Worf threw the knife away in frustration and disgust. *The sword is the Klingon way, not Picard's*, he told himself, as if that truth might assuage another...

"Worf? What is it?"

"I... dropped something, sir," he said flatly.

Picard accepted the lie. "The attack?" he asked, his voice little more than a whisper.

"The Bridge is gone... and Engineering. The crew have abandoned ship. We are alone, under emergency power," Worf told him, his eyes still riveted on the discarded knife.

"Who...?"

"Humanoid. Origin unknown. Their ship is of no known design. However, it is a composite of Romulan, Federation, and Ferengi technology and materials. Pirates," Worf concluded distastefully.

Picard did not answer. Sweat now mixed with the gore on the Human's face, and trickled into the mottled burns. His respiration was rapid and shallow.

"Captain?!"

"P...pain," breathed Picard.

Worf slapped another ampoule of painkiller into the hypo and laid it against the undamaged side of Picard's throat.

"Communications?" resumed the Captain after several long seconds, his breathing slowly stabilising again.

"Our communicators, short range and intraship only. The subspace is gone. However, in fifty-two hours the Enterprise will know that something is wrong. They will come," he added, the words 'or else' implicit in his tone.

The undamaged corner of Picard's mouth tugged upward in a vain effort to reflect his amusement.

Worf looked away.

They fell into a long silence eventually broken by Picard.

"Worf?"

"Sir?"

"Don't sit so quietly. Say something. Do something." Picard said roughly, leaving Worf puzzled.

Worf stayed that way for some time, through his description of the aliens, a dissertation on the inadequacies of the Lauris and her crew, and a description, at Picard's prompting, of the events following the fall. Worf paused after a lengthy diatribe on the ineptness of the pirates in hand to hand combat, and looked down.

Picard was asleep.

He finally began to understand. His expression cleared momentarily, then grew bleak. Blind! Something never to be contemplated by a warrior.

He stood up as if unable to stay still a moment longer, and strode to the food dispenser. "Water," he told it experimentally.

Nothing.

He would have to leave Picard to forage, and to get the other two medikits. He wondered, as he turned, what had been in the holds that was so valuable that pirates, scavengers that they were, would not bother with the upper decks.

Picard seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Worf ran the sensor over him again and was gratified to see no change in the precarious readings, though something still badly needed to be done about the arm, and the filth.

Medical provided the Klingon's next shock. One medikit was intact, its three ampoules of painkiller in place, but the other was opened, and a broad spectrum antibiotic, all three vials of painkiller and a tri-ox ampoule were missing. He growled low under his breath and closed it up again. Human inefficiency! A freighter, of all vessels, should always be able to keep its own supplies up to date.

There was nothing here that Worf could use to immobilise or attempt to repair the arm. An osteo-tractor lay on the instrument bench, but meant nothing to the warrior. A large packet of old-fashioned dressings did, however.

He found something in the recreation room. A simulated timber 2-D chess board in polished Oregon and walnut. He snatched it up with scant regard for the pieces, which flew in all directions, and continued on his way, having found the food slots there also to be inoperable.

The crew quarters brought better results. Worf was well aware of the Human penchant for hoarding real food, brought back from shore leave and sabbaticals, in their quarters. He was not disappointed.

The search yielded fruit, chocolate, Saurian brandy, fruit juice, Andorian thless, and a bottle of 'therapeutic' mineral water from Vega II.

In the Captain's quarters he found the probable reason for the attack. A hard copy of the ship's manifest lay open on Cordas' desk. Aside from the official medical cargo, the Lauris was carrying a consignment of warp coils, generators, weapons components, and worst, a large shipment of dilithium ore from Elaas, all for only one of the newest Federation signatories: Ronii. The whole incident grew more sinister by the hour.

Who were the pirates? Who provided the parts for their ships in the first place? And, most important, how did they know about the Lauris' consignment?

Worf added the book to the bag he had 'borrowed' from the First Officer's quarters, along with several oranges.

The Captain was conscious when Worf returned.

Worf saw the sudden awareness in the Human's face, the knowledge that he had come back, but he'd also seen the misery and pain that Picard had swiftly masked.

"Worf?"

"Here," said the Klingon quietly. "I have located rations and some fluids. The food units no longer function, although they should."

"Very... good," Picard told him, a little of the tension easing from his body. Worf brought the mineral water to the bedside and poured a little into its ornate, cup sized lid.

"Water," he said succinctly, gingerly raising Picard's shoulders just enough for him to drink. The Captain was exhausted and breathing hard when he finally turned his face away.

"Food?" Worf offered.

"H...hardly," Picard retorted weakly.

"In that case I must now look at your arm," he announced.

Picard closed his eyes as the Klingon cut away his sleeve and dropped the pieces on the deck, then opened them again as if it might help him reach through Worf's uneasy silence. "What is it?" he rasped.

"I must... find a bowl," said the Klingon diffidently.

Picard listened to him go, not far, because he was back in a few moments, then to the sound of water being trickled into the bowl, and finally, the seal being broken on something, presumably from the medikit.

"Worf?" Picard tried again.

His hands immersed in the bowl soaking several of the dressings to use as swabs, the Klingon looked up, frustration in his eyes, and with no words to comfort the Human. A moment later Picard felt the cold, wet, pungent cloth against his skin.

At first the contact brought relief, even a soothing pleasantness as Worf cleaned, but as he worked around the wound the burning of the antiseptic solution, then the sheer agony of his very touch on the devastated flesh, brought tears to Picard's eyes.

Worf heard the unsuccessfully suppressed cry of pain and paused, before continuing with a lightness of touch that might have surprised Picard had he noticed it through the pain.

When Worf was done with the arm he stood up. With his phaser, he cut the chessboard in half and used one portion to immobilise the unstraightened arm, tying it with great care, using the rolls of dressings in the package. Twice he thought Picard was going to pass out, but the Frenchman persevered, unintentionally entertaining the Klingon with his long, mellifluous strings of French invective and further, with a fervent volley of positively obscene Klingon profanities when that gentleman inadvertently jarred the board.

Worf's eyes flashed with amusement but his mouth remained set as he concentrated on the unfamiliar tasks.

"I cannot set the bones," he told Picard when he was finished. "I do not know how," he

admitted.

"I'll... " Still in considerable pain, Picard paused for breath. "I'll... let you... in... on a little secret," he said in a whispery voice.

Worf cocked his head inquiringly. "Sir?"

"I'm... very glad you don't... know how."

"I, too," the Klingon muttered half seriously as he reached for the bowl. "I am going to clean away the rest of the blood. It will be cold," he announced.

Again, the corner of Picard's mouth tugged upward. Face, neck, head and hair took time. Again there was much pain, but the result was worthwhile.

Worf looked down at Picard's trembling hands and the bloodied bowl of water, his face carved in stone. Wordlessly, he took the mess to the head and dumped it all in the sanitary unit which was, thankfully, one of the few things working off auxiliary power.

He stayed there for some time, trying not to remember the image of his Captain - his *friend* - lying blank eyed and in pain, miserable and afraid in a strange place, and with only himself for support.

Worf shook his head angrily, hating his own inadequacies. A warrior did not concern himself about such things. A warrior lived by the sword, died by the sword...

Another Klingon would not deny a warrior a fitting death, another Klingon would not be the cause of such humiliation. He lashed out at the bulkhead in sheer rage, the bowl clattering on the deck. A moment later he had collected himself, only his ragged breath betraying his inner conflict. It, too, had been ruthlessly controlled long before he reached the Captain's bedside again.

Picard had slipped back into an uneasy sleep. Worf dragged a chair to the bedside and sprawled in it, intending to keep an eye on the Human and peruse the ship's manifest.

He stirred several hours later to the sound of Picard's voice.

"Worf!" Picard was crying out weakly, trying for the third time to rouse him.

"Captain?" Worf was immediately on his feet, wide awake. One look at Picard's ashen face told him all he needed to know. He reached for the hypospray.

The painkiller took effect as he ran the sensor over the battered body again. No improvement, but the Human was holding his own.

There are sedatives, sir - " Worf suggested tentatively.

"Not... with a head wound... " Picard told him.

"Of course," growled the Klingon, frowning over the readings, which as far as he could tell, indicated that Picard's blood volume had actually dropped. He was trying to find a way to get the instrument to scan for sites of internal bleeding when Picard interrupted.

"Worf, what's wrong? Is the ship - ?"

"I... am having difficulty... with the medical scanner. I am unfamiliar with its operation," he rumbled tersely.

"Of course you are," Picard said gently. "You're not a doctor, Worf. I... know... this is not easy for you.."

Worf scowled. "My feelings are irrelevant. At this moment only your survival is important. I should not have slept. I have been negligent in my duties. I could have tried Engineering again, or the auxiliary computers - "

"To try to tie in the subspace?" guessed Picard.

"Yes."

"You slept because of the stress. You are... not a machine, Worf. Don't... blame yourself for a perfectly normal... physiological reaction. You relaxed because I did. Now go and do what you can with the computers. That's an... order. I'm... not going... anywhere, you know," he rasped.

"Yes, sir," the Klingon said, far happier in the more familiar role. He paused. "I will attend to your ablutions when I return."

As he listened to Worf turning with undue haste for the door, Picard again managed a smile at the Klingon's reluctant acceptance of his role as nursemaid.

The painkiller was doing the job it was designed for: making catastrophic wounds of the variety likely to arise aboard any space-going vessel bearable for the victim until surgical intervention, stasis... or death. No amount of painkiller could, however, completely mask the agony of disruptor wounds - a rare injury since the peace treaty, but with devastating effects on the flesh.

In the silence of his empty quarters Picard tried hard to deny the relentless pain that stopped him from moving anything more than his toes or his right hand.

His only distraction was the impenetrable night that cloaked his eyes. He refused to contemplate any possibility that the condition might be permanent, concentrating instead on exploring that dark world as an exercise in understanding Geordi La Forge a little better. The maelstrom images from the Engineer's visor had stayed with him a long time after that exercise was over. Now this... the naked reality behind those images. Picard clamped down hard again on his rising anxiety - anxiety that threatened to turn to terror. Of all those moments in which he had been most afraid, none had ever been as hellish as this private prison.

He closed his eyes, and was somehow comforted by the gesture. Gradually, his mind cleared of all thoughts but one, the one that had been his constant companion since he'd wakened to his new world of agony and darkness.

Death.

He knew that it hovered somewhere not too far away, waiting. He also knew that on top of the few readings of which Worf could make sense, there was more; a sure knowledge that inside there were organs damaged, that he was bleeding into himself, and that there was absolutely nothing Worf could do about it.

Engineering was a disaster. The ship's Human Engineer still lay where he'd fallen after taking the warp engines off line.

Worf could see why it had been done. The explosion had jammed the injectors and a ruptured coolant line had allowed the coolant to leak into the now sealed main engineering area where the ship's intermix chamber stood, eerily subdued.

He stepped over the body to look at the control panel. His hands flew over the controls, trying to bring up information about the impulse engine.

A moment later his giant fist slammed into the mute board. Main engineering was tied to the ship's computer. The backup computer was handling only emergency requirements - life support, force field, gravity, transporter, and limited sensors.

In control again, Worf strode out in search of the computer banks. He did not know what he was going to do when he found them. Someone like Geordi might be able to reprogram a computer to do something it was not designed to do; even the boy; but Worf had never had time for such intricacies.

The U.S.S. Enterprise slipped silently through space, heading toward its rendezvous with the freighter Lauris. Commander William Riker sat alone in his chair, contemplating the quietness of the watch and the ease of the completion of their mission.

Wesley Crusher leaned across and said something conversationally to Data at Ops and the substitute Tactical Officer yawned. Riker looked along a row of empty seats and decided that tranquillity was definitely overrated.

A moment later he was to change his mind.

"Sir, a distress signal, long range! No, it's gone. It was there, and then it wasn't, Commander," cried the young Lieutenant at Tactical.

"Did you get a fix on it? Identification?"

Fischer's hands flew over Worf's console. "Yes, sir," he reported. "Sir - it's the Lauris."

Riker's face grew taut. "Send them our compliments. Find out what the hell is going on. Co-ordinates?"

"Transferring to Helm now sir."

"Time to those co-ordinates at current speed."

"Four days, seventeen hours, twelve - " began the android, his eyes on Wesley's board.

"Thank you, Mr. Data," forestalled Riker. "Mr. Crusher, plot an intercept course. Warp six."

"Aye, sir," Crusher responded soberly. When he was done he turned back to Riker.

"It will still take us over thirty-nine hours to get there," he said quietly.

"We don't know for certain that there is a problem yet," Riker told them all softly and looked back at Fischer, a question in his deceptively calm blue eyes.

"No response on any frequency sir. Long range scanners indicate that she is there, but it's like she's dead in the water, just drifting."

"Warp drive shutdown?" speculated Wesley. "Maybe, but the probability of the impulse engine crashing at the same time has to be close to zero."

"Agreed," said Riker darkly. "Go to warp eight." He turned back to Fischer. "Find out if any one else heard the distress signal, and if someone, *anyone*, is closer."

It took Fischer some time to ascertain that there was no-one else available in that quadrant, and that two other Federation vessels were responding to the call until informed by Fischer that the Enterprise was closer.

He had just informed Riker of that fact when Counselor Troi, although not yet due on duty, arrived on the Bridge. Riker had moved back to the Captain's chair. Troi moved swiftly to his side.

"What is it?" she said quietly.

"The Lauris," he replied. "The ship is dead in space and our hails are not being answered."

"But the Lauris is just a small freighter. What could possibly have - ?"

Riker turned to face her fully. "We'll know that when we get there. For now all we can do is wait," he told her, then allowed his gaze to move slowly to each of the worried faces around the bridge, commending them all to the same thought, despite his own, very real concern..

Sleep refused to come again to the Enterprise Captain. The silent hours dragged by at a funereal rate.

His many abortive attempts to occupy his thoughts led only to an over-stimulated mind, a stupendous headache and the beginnings of a phobic reaction to the cruel combination of immobility and sudden sensory deprivation.

Finally, driven by an irrational need to do something, Picard gritted his teeth and used his good elbow as a lever to try and sit up.

Waves and waves of nauseating pain beat against him, overwhelmed him as he struggled, panting and crying out with every centimetre gained. He refused to give in, railing against going back... back to that aloneness, to being trapped within the unmoving prison of his own body. Moment by moment the agonising pain began to win, the darkness to close in. "No-o!" he screamed helplessly as he fell back.

Worf laid a hand on Picard's good shoulder to still the Human's restless nightmare. He was worse, and the synthetic blood expander was barely managing to stay ahead of the haemorrhaging now. The arm was swollen and discoloured and he was going into shock again.

Suddenly, Picard's eyes sprang open, their empty hazel depths now filled with indefinable, nightmare terror.

"Help me," his voice was barely audible. "Help me." His right hand felt for and gripped the Klingon's outstretched arm.

Unseen, Worf looked away, a shiver passing through him. The Human's fingers tightened.

Worf's eyes lighted on the discarded dagger and grew bright with pain.

Slowly, he turned back to Picard. "How?" he said.

"Worf?" Picard's voice changed. "Then... it was... only a dream..." he said in short, ragged breaths, though his grip did not loosen.

"Yes. A... nightmare," Worf confirmed tonelessly.

"The computer?" Picard forced himself to think.

"The subspace communications on this ship are powered through the warp engines. It eliminates the need for an additional power source," Worf reported disgustedly, picking up the medical scanner and gently freeing his other arm.

He watched the readings on the mediscanner, Klingon fatalism slowly being eroded by their one, overriding message: Captain Picard was going to die.

Mechanically he went through the medikits for anything that might forestall the inevitable, loading ampoule after ampoule.

Afterward, the readings had barely changed. Toxins were rapidly building up in the Captain's bloodstream, as what Worf was now able to identify on the tricorder as gradual renal failure accelerated alarmingly. Worf shook the instrument in frustration. He should have been able to understand it all, should have been able to do more!

Picard heard the accompanying low pitched growl. He slowly lifted his good hand and felt for Worf's arm which, after a moment's hesitation, the Klingon extended silently. "It's all right, my friend. You've done all you can," he whispered. "Whatever... happens now, I want you to know that - "

Suddenly the doors hissed open. Worf stood up swiftly, phaser in one hand, dagger in the other.

"Commander Riker!" he cried out uncharacteristically.

The words filtered through Picard's dark nether world of suffering. He sighed, lids closing over the blank eyes as the knowledge turned to relief, and then oblivion.

"My God!" whispered Crusher, bending over his inert form, her trained eyes able to read the terrible truth on the medical scanner in its entirety. She struck her communicator. "Medical emergency! Four to beam directly to sickbay!"

When they materialised Riker tapped his own communicator, his eyes riveted on Worf's bloodied uniform.

"Riker to Data. We've found the Captain and Worf. Bring the rest of the away team back to the Enterprise," he ordered and faced the Klingon as Crusher and the paramedics worked furiously in the background. "What happened?" he said quietly.

"The ship was attacked by pirates, an unidentified humanoid form in a ship constructed of both Federation and enemy components. The Bridge was destroyed immediately, and Engineering was hit. The crew abandoned ship. The Captain and I confronted the enemy. He was caught in the blast radius of a Klingon disruptor and fell about five metres."

Riker was watching Worf's expression during the entire dissertation, searching for a different Worf: for the friend he'd glimpsed only minutes before, knife and phaser poised and as close to shouting with joy as he would ever get. The alien features, however, remained as closed and as uncompromising as ever. It was the dark eyes, frequently sliding to the emergency treatment table, that told him everything he needed to know.

"There was a distress signal?" Worf enquired detachedly as the paramedics scurried to and fro, Crusher barking orders in rapid succession.

"One short squirt." Riker followed his lead. "It must have been sent just as they were hit," he surmised, his own eyes also monitoring the frantic scene.

They lapsed into silence, out of place yet unwilling to leave.

"He was... dying," Worf said slowly, watching the swiftness and ease with which Dr. Selar was setting and repairing the arm that he could do nothing about.

Riker had heard the torment in the words. He turned to Worf as the diagnostic board began to bleep, saw the tension in the fingers that still gripped the hilt of the Klingon blade, the look in the eyes that watched the readings slowly rise to stable levels and remain there. A look of understanding and great affection came into the blue eyes.

"Mr. Worf," he said quietly. "I suggest you go and change that uniform - and take your station on the Bridge."

"Aye, sir." Worf's eyes flashed with appreciation. With a final glance at Picard, he turned briskly and strode out.

Riker watched him go, then moved quietly to the Captain's bedside, peaceful now that Crusher and the others were able to leave him long enough to go and prepare for surgery.

For a while he silently and relievedly watched the rhythmic rise and fall of Picard's chest. Then, as the others began to reappear, he squared his shoulders.

"Welcome back," he said softly, turned wordlessly as both doctors arrived to begin pre-op, and strode out.

The door page sounded. Riker stirred, blinked, then deselected the noisy holo of popular twentieth century jazz musicians and rose stiffly. He looked across at the desk chrono. He had fallen asleep in his chair, waiting for word.

"Come," he said, stretching his back. "Worf? What can I do for you?" he asked, mildly surprised, when the Klingon appeared.

Worf paused, his gaze taking in the Human's dishevelled condition, tired, puffy eyes and uncomfortable posture.

"I have been trying to identify the beings who attacked the freighter," he said, choosing to ignore all of it. "The ship's computer has identified them as Carassa, from the planet Carasajj. The stolen shipment was destined for its sister world Ronii. The system is near the Romulan frontier. A peace agreement between the two worlds was only ratified six months ago. It is only a matter of weeks since their entry into the Federation was formalised at Babel."

Riker frowned. "So what are you saying? There's a connection between this attack and their entry into the Federation?"

"The vessel which attacked the Lauris was far superior to any Carassan technology. The Carassa have been protecting themselves from Ron incursions for over one hundred and fifty years. There is also no official record of most of the cargo on Captain Cordas' manifest - the Lauris was supposed to be carrying medical supplies and equipment to enable Federation specialists to upgrade Ronii's primitive and discriminatory health system. The official logs show only a fraction of the load recorded in the Captain's personal manifest."

"A damned privateer," Riker growled. "Well, he got a lot more than he bargained for this time."

"Sir - " Worf began.

"Commander Riker, report to the Bridge. Sensors picking up a vessel incoming at warp six," interrupted the voice of Worf's relief via the intercom.

"On my way," Riker responded and looked at the Klingon, who turned with him by silent assent for the door.

"Open hailing frequencies," directed Riker as he took over the centre seat from Data and Worf stepped into the position vacated by the female relief.

"Unidentified vessel responding. Universal translator tied in," reported Worf.

"On screen, Lieutenant."

Riker watched curiously as the screen filled with a vision of a Bridge that was a blend of the familiar and the unknown. A hesitant figure stepped into view. The little grey hominid stared back at them with yellow, feline eyes.

"You are Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the U.S.S Enterprise?" he asked through the translator.

"I am Commander William T. Riker, First Officer of the Enterprise. We request that you identify yourselves."

"We wish to speak to Captain Picard. It is imperative that we speak to him," the little being persisted.

Riker shot a look at his Tactical Officer, a question in his eyes. Worf read the suspicion and the question and nodded. They would not have to find the pirates. The Carassa had come to them.

"Captain Picard is currently under medical care. He was in transit to this ship when the vessel carrying him, the Lauris, was attacked. He was badly injured by disruptor fire," revealed Riker, with slow deliberation.

The Carassan seemed visibly shocked. Minor chaos seemed to ensue. In a flurry of his own high-pitched language, spoken away from the screen and at such a rate that the universal translator had no chance, he quieted things, calling a second being to his side, then dismissing him just as quickly.

"My name is Tenirra. We had no idea," he told them, still unnerved. "The criminal Cordas made no mention of passengers when he conspired with the Ron to sell them the technology to destroy us."

"You were spying?"

"On the Ron? Of course. We knew that their true objective in joining the Federation was to gain access to your weapons technology, therefore our surveillance was increased accordingly," he said more confidently.

"What exactly do you want from Captain Picard?" Riker's gaze was unwavering.

The Carassan looked back at him appraisingly. After a long pause he seemed to make a decision.

"We wish to transfer the cargo from the Lauris to the Enterprise. We are not thieves. We want Captain Picard to intercede on our behalf, to the Federation. The treaty between Carasajj and Ronii is a sham, perpetrated by the Ronii Quorum and corrupt officials and diplomats high in our government. Our Monarch thinks he is a visionary, but he is nothing more than a dreamer. The same traders who provided the technology for this vessel are preparing to do exactly as Cordas intended to do: arm and supply Ronii with whatever they ask for, in exchange for interests in Ronii's vast mining industry."

"As a sister world to Ronii, it is logical to assume that Carasajj also must have large mineral reserves," interjected Data.

"Of course," said the alien impatiently, "but profitably valuable ores, metals and stones are rare on our world. Our greatest single resource and the source of almost all of our energy requirements is something the Federation has no use for - oil."

"Then what is it that Ronii wants from your world?" asked Riker sceptically.

"They want... us."

Riker's expression froze. "You?"

"Do you know why Ronii has no formal health care? Why the masses have suffered so much?" said the Carassan.

"The official report indicates that Ronii has never had the machinery in place to develop medical technology. The rest seems mostly to stem from the fact that sixty-two percent of the

annual budget goes directly to the military," Data told them all matter of factly.

"They suffer because their technology was built from the blood of my people," interjected the little alien sharply. "When we developed spaceflight and discovered intelligent life on Ronii our scientists couldn't wait to improve their miserable, feudal existence. They gave it all, too fast, too thoughtlessly. The Ronii were predominantly a ruthless warrior race. It took them very little time to realise that our people could do easily what would take them years to learn. They enslaved all those who had gone there to help them - teachers, sociologists, scientists, doctors... For a time their world grew and flourished and they began to close the gap technologically, even though the vast majority of the population still existed in wretched poverty. When the slaves began to die of old age, illness and accidents, things began to go wrong. That's when they started to come to Carasajj. By then they had all but caught up, and they had been visited, as we had, by the strange little traders who call themselves Ferengi. The Ron ships were crude but effective, and achieved with no space program, no need to overcome such problems as null gravity and propulsion. All had been handed to them again... this time by the Ferengi, and by us."

"We will take your cargo. I would also ask that you accompany the load, and meet with us in person to discuss the matter further," added Riker calculatedly.

Again the 'cat's eyes' seemed to size him up. After a pause the alien nodded. "Done," Tenirra said, followed by several untranslated phrases.

"What?" snapped Riker, turning to Data.

"...at 1700 hours," the computer cut in again several seconds later.

Riker made a cut-throat gesture.

"The computer was unable to translate the Carassan's full response to your question sir. It would appear that the being's agitation caused it to lapse into dialect, reducing the speed at which the translator could process the language.

"Agitation? Why?"

"Unknown," admitted Data.

Riker signalled Communications and resumed. "Tenirra, our translation device was unable to translate your last communication."

"I gave my word, in my native tongue, according to the custom of my race. This was a problem?"

"No," Riker said smoothly. "Your word is enough. For now."

The alien nodded and the communication was cut.

Jean-Luc Picard woke from a nightmare of darkness and pain to one of unbearable light. His face screwed up, squinting against it.

"Worf?" he said tentatively, unsure if he was awake, or dreaming.

Slowly, very slowly, the world came into focus. Sickbay. The sound of voices nearby told him that the doctors were busy with another case.

For a long time he lay quietly, his clear hazel eyes searching, savouring every molecule of his bright world. It seemed that nothing else could be as important as the shadows playing on the wall, or the small circles of reflected light from the instruments as they danced on the ceiling...

He looked down at his arm, free and clean, only a reddened outline of the jagged hole remaining of the horrific wound. He moved it experimentally. The unexpected ease of that brought him closer to weeping than all of the suffering on the Lauris.

With slow deliberation he raised his hands and looked at them, one shiny and mottled in colour, and itchy; the other a comfortingly familiar sight. He moved his fingers and absently considered the continuing wonder of the fully opposable Human thumb, revelling in all the detail, the grand design of it, until at last all that was left was to cover his face with them as reaction overcame the joy.

The meeting with Tenirra, who was revealed actually to be a senior bureaucrat thrust unwillingly into the covert operation, had gone well, Riker revealing his own talent for negotiation and diplomacy. The cargo was transferred, along with Tenirra and two of his people, to the Enterprise. They would act as emissaries to the Federation itself. The question of the Carassan's criminal action against the freighter would also be addressed through those emissaries, although, Riker told them, the fact that Kordas was running an illegal operation involving not only smuggling but probable violation of the Prime Directive, would almost certainly weigh well in their favour.

The wary Carassans had taken a long time to come around, but they had seemed to sense the tall Human's innate integrity, and had eventually allowed themselves to be convinced.

Jean-Luc Picard was resting, his eyes closed, when Will Riker arrived some time later and came quietly to his side. He was about to turn and go again when the Captain's eyes opened and focused on him.

Riker smiled slowly. "It's good to have you back, sir," he said softly.

Picard returned the smile. "It's good to be back, Number One. It was a... long trip," he said wryly.

"I'll bet." Riker sat down on the bedside chair. "A few more hours and we'd have been too late."

Picard's face grew serious. "I know. It was hard on Worf. Nursing is not in the Klingon lexicon. If I had been a Klingon, the question of your arrival time would have been academic."

"Yes. 'Death with honour...' " quoted Riker, remembering another time and another Klingon.

"He is a unique and very special individual," said Picard, almost to himself.

"Agreed." Riker stood up again. "Dr. Crusher says that you will be up and around in 48 hours if you, quote, behave yourself, unquote. We look forward to seeing you on the Bridge again, sir."

"As do I, Commander," Picard agreed heartily as Riker turned to go. "Will... "

Riker faced him again, his head tilted quizzically.

"Tell Geordi I would like to speak to him."

A gleam of understanding came into the blue eyes. "He's in Ten Forward. I'll tell him," he said.

Picard lay back slowly as Riker's footsteps receded. Only slowly did he become aware of other voices somewhere in the recesses of sickbay.

Moments later Worf appeared, followed by Beverly Crusher, and strode purposefully across the main Sickbay. He paused suddenly at the doors, turned and came almost reluctantly back to the ward.

Picard did not allow his amusement to show as the Klingon came to a halt at his bedside.

"Captain. You are fully recovered?"

"Well, almost, Mr. Worf. You were not injured?"

"No, sir. It... was my duty to protect you. I failed in that task," Worf said slowly.

"Indeed? And just exactly how does a Klingon divert a phaser blast?" muttered Picard.

The Klingon's eyes flashed. "A Security Officer ensures that there is no risk."

Picard sighed. "Has Commander Riker trained everyone on this ship to think of their Captain as a child who cannot look after himself?"

"That is not what I meant," Worf replied tersely.

"But that is what you were saying. I was a Security Officer long before you ever went to the Academy, Lieutenant. I knew what I was doing - so enough of this rubbish!"

Picard thought he detected a hint of amusement behind the Klingon's scowl.

"Aye, sir," Worf said roughly, and turned to go.

"And Worf - "

Worf turned back. "Captain?"

"Thanks."

Worf nodded silently, wheeled and strode off.

Picard shook his head slowly.

"There is hope for him, you know," drawled Beverly Crusher, turning from the only other patient in the ward and coming to his side.

"Oh?"

"Mmhmm. I have just spent the last hour trying to teach a ham-fisted Security Officer how to use a medical tricorder properly. He even asked for reference material."

"About what?"

"First aid, fractures, concussion," replied Crusher drily, as she upgraded his notes on her tricorder.

The Captain smiled slowly to himself as Sickbay fell silent again.

"A very special individual," he said softly.



MEMORIES

Must keep running... Don't look back.
Quickly... They're close behind.
Hot breath searing my neck.
They'll catch me... A few more steps.
So close... Those terrible cries.
Faster, faster... Daylight.
Forget the voices... Run to the light.
Grasping fingers... Don't give up.
Nearly there...

Computer, lights...

Tasha, don't cry... Remember where you are.
Everything will be fine... You were dreaming.
No one will hurt you... That was long ago.
This is the Enterprise... Hush now.
You're safe...

Jenny Howsam



DANGEROUS DIPLOMACY

by

John Gallacher

PROLOGUE

Starbase 162. Not the most exciting of all places in the galaxy. But then nobody said that it would be.

Two men waited in the reception lounge looking into the large hanger beyond the glass. They were dressed in the official robes of diplomats. The first man was middle aged, had greying hair, a full face of hair and eyes full of wisdom and experience. The second, much younger and thinner built, showed an eagerness to please. The first man spoke somewhat impatiently.

"When IS that ship going to arrive?"

He strode about the sitting area with growing frustration.

"They'll only be delayed for a while, they said. What on earth stopped them? No doubt our good Captain picked a fight with the Ferengi Fleet and got himself blown to bits."

The second man, more relaxed than the first, was sitting right back in his chair in a lazy fashion.

"Look, calm down, Dextan. You know what the medical chief said about getting agitated!"

Dextan gave a grunt of disregard. *Very unprofessional*, thought the second man. "If it helps why don't we go over the Balton III notes again? Give us something to do. Hmm?"

The older man looked at the younger man with careful inspection for a long while, then reluctantly conceded defeat. He reminded Dextan of himself when he became part of the Federation Diplomatic Corps.

"Oh, all right. We might as well. You got the files, Melanby?"

Melanby produced the files in an efficient manner. Dextan took the file and opened it up. He took out the various notes and diagrams and handed a wad of data to Melanby, who began sifting through the sheets.

"According to this," began Dextan sitting down to read, "the situation has changed little since first contact."

"I agree, though it looks like a trade blockade on both sides. Both continents are refusing to GIVE trade to the other, but they both want what the opposite side wants."

Melanby was intrigued by the conflict. A case of 'I-want and I'll-not-give-to-him.

Dextan nodded. "Stupid, isn't it?"

Melanby had to agree. He quickly turned his attention to the hangar beyond. Various ships of different designs stood there. He recognised two of the old Enterprise class ships and... oh, if only he could remember the rest of their names!

"...You daydreaming?"

The voice caused Melanby to turn his head suddenly and he found that he had lost track of the conversation.

"I'm ...sorry. I was just..."

Dextan raised his hand to stop the babble that was coming at him.

"No need. Think you should have been a Starship Captain instead of an Ambassador."

Melanby blushed. Mind you, it was everyone's dream to be at the helm of a Starship with the prospect of adventure. But the 'adventure' these men were about to undertake would be no joyride. In fact it would probably be the most dangerous mission they would do in all their careers. This was the reason the Federation felt that two Ambassadors were necessary. The Baltonians had an attitude that made the most vicious Klingon thug look like a flower girl - or, at least, that was the rumour.

Dextan smiled at the remark he'd made. He could see that Melanby had a sense of humour and often took advantage of this, and Melanby knew it.

Their conversation was disturbed by a receptionist entering the lounge. She made her way towards the men in a casual manner.

"Excuse me, sirs. I've received news about your flight."

Her voice was polite and she was possibly quite unaware of Dextan's grumbles earlier.

"About time too," he muttered. "Well, what of it?"

Melanby sat up, interested.

The receptionist continued. "She's the Enterprise and she'll be here in three-quarters of an hour. Captain Picard apologizes for the delay but they were held up at Gamma Tentai."

"PICARD?!!!" snapped Dextan. There was a hint of disbelief in his voice and Melanby caught it.

"You know of him?" he enquired in an curious fashion. The receptionist turned to Dextan as if to get an answer to the question posed. The older man nodded.

"Yes, I've heard of him. I've heard a great deal of him." Suddenly everyone became VERY interested. "He's in command of one of those new Galaxy Class starships."

The receptionist gave a polite cough which stopped Dextan in mid-sentence. The

older man gave the woman a scowl of discontent.

"There WERE two of them to start with!"

"Were? What happened to the other?" Melanby's voice was stern with seriousness.

"The other," she continued, "the USS 'Yamato', was destroyed after an encounter in the Neutral Zone. There were no survivors."

"Romulans?" asked Melanby.

"No. But I seem to recall something mentioned of a probe or, at least something like that. I can't quite remember the exact details."

"Whew!" thought Melanby.

"I'm sorry. You were saying?"

Dextan suddenly collected himself and brought himself back into the conversation. "Well, anyway, his crew is unique in the galaxy. A Klingon in Security and an android in a command position."

"What?" Melanby was stunned.

"Oh yes. Mind you, as a personal opinion, he's got to be good. With a mixture like that you've GOT to be. Ah, I nearly forgot. Their Chief Engineer is blind as a bat."

"You mean Mr La Forge?"

"You've heard of him, Melanby?" It was Dextan's turn to be alarmed.

"You get to know these things in my position." He grinned. "He wears a VISOR; gives him near normal vision."

"Well, I for one would like to meet this Captain Picard. Sounds like an interesting person," smiled Dextan.

"I hope he gets here soon. It's getting late and I'm getting tired," groaned Melanby, rubbing his eyes.

The room was dark and the only light in the room was the light coming from the hangar; and since there was a lot of shadow no-one could see the two figures lurking in the background.

And since no-one saw the two strangers they couldn't see the laser knives they concealed

CHAPTER I

The jungle air was warm and heavy, and the foliage wasn't much better. In the middle of this vast jungle was a large clearing in which lay the decaying remains of a fortress. In some places the outer walls had collapsed, allowing entrance to the ancient defences. And it had already done this; for a tall figure in mustard and black wearing a silver armour-like sash

warily entered the court-yard. He gave short sharp glances in all directions, moved on a small distance and looked around again. If anything was going to happen, it was going to happen now.

"RRR-AAA RRR GHH!"

Worf spun on his heels to see a reptile-like creature jump down from the level above. Where did it come from? The fort was like something from a stereotype Foreign Legion. It must have been lying down until - THUMP! The reptile caught Worf by the shoulder and sent him to the ground. At almost the same instant it grabbed an old piece of post and turned to finish Worf. It dived towards the Klingon, post held like a dagger poised for the kill. When the creature was above him Worf thrust his legs up into the assailant's chest, winding it and hurled it backward over him. Worf heard it crash land. By that time he was back on his feet. Then he saw what he had been looking for in the first place; his warrior's gauntlet by an old ruined well. He ran towards it with the speed of an athlete. When he got there he crouched and flung it onto his right hand. As he did so he turned his head to see his attacker picking itself up, rather dazed though. Worf afforded himself a quick glance at his gauntlet. It was leather with straps of metal and pointed studs. Where the thumb should have been a long rounded spear protruded. He was ready now.

The two opponents squared up, walking around facing each other. Then as if they were given a cue each dived towards the other at the same time. Punch after punch was thrown. Dust was thrown up. The two seemed to be equal until a savage right hook from Worf sent the creature staggering away from him. Now was the chance to finish it. Worf began a violent volley of punches sending it towards the well. It was unrelenting. The attacker had no chance for recovery. Despite its thick natural armour, it was still being hurt. Nearer and nearer to the well they came. At the last possible moment, when the creature was on the edge of the shaft, Worf delivered a savage blow to the stomach. There was sickening crunch. With the aid of the gauntlet, his arm had become a bayonet. The point was protruding from the animal's back. Worf held it there for a few long moments then withdrew it quickly. But there was no blood, only a green mark where the wound should be. The reptile wobbled for a second and then plummeted down the shaft. Before it could fall any further it vanished as if it had never existed. Worf let out a gentle (ever so gentle) sigh of relief as he heard the whirr of the Holodecks doors opening.

"Computer," he said aloud. There was a beep of acknowledgement. "Program complete. Save." There was another bleep.

Worf turned to see Geordi La Forge and William Riker enter.

"That was the fastest I've seen you finish that thing," said La Forge with an air of amazement.

"But not my best. I did not anticipate the first assault," replied Worf.

"That looked all right to me," snipped Riker, strolling around the yard. "And you recovered well."

"My statement still holds validity, Commander."

Riker sighed. It was no use arguing. "When you're ready report to the bridge." The First Officer turned and began heading for the exit.

"Aye, sir," Worf replied, removing his glove and giving himself a quick dusting. He was

not pleased with his performance.

Captain Picard sat relaxed in his command chair going over all the relevant information about this diplomatic mission that he was about to undertake. Deanna Troi at on his left watched his face with interest, for Troi was a Betazoid. This meant she should have the ability to read the thoughts of others, but her father was Human, so her ability was limited to the feelings of others. She was so caught up in reading Picard's feelings, she didn't realised that she was staring. Unfortunately, Picard did.

"Found anything interesting, Counselor?" he exclaimed, putting the PADD on his lap, grinning.

Troi jumped slightly. "I'm sorry. But right now you seem to be rather tense for what is a simple diplomatic affair."

"Simple!" Picard was rather startled at the statement. "Balton III is anything but simple. The two sides are like chalk and cheese. I'm just glad I'm not the one to solve it."

Lt Commander Data, who was positioned at the Ops console, swung round to voice his opinion. "Actually the situation, Counselor, has become so complex and difficult that Starfleet feels that it requires the assistance of two diplomats."

"Two!" Now Troi was speechless. "Why...?"

Picard was only just able to compose himself enough to stifle a chuckle. He turned to Data to hear his answer to Troi's situation.

"The use of two diplomats is to help speeds thing up and also because of the situation - if one of them is eliminated by a hired assassin..."

Picard quickly sobered up at this realisation, but his attention was focused on Troi who had her hand up to halt Data's explanation. "Are you all right, Counsellor?" There was no compassion in the captain's voice.

"Yes! I just..."

"I know. I've also called a staff meeting in five minutes to discuss whether any other actions are necessary." He turned to Data. "What's our ETA at Starbase 162, Mr Data?"

"Thirty-five minutes... mark."

The conference room table had its delegates seated at it. Worf had come from the holodeck with Riker and La Forge. Ensign Crusher was there; he was off duty when the meeting was called but since he would be on duty during the trip, he was expected to attend. Dr Pulaski was on hand to discuss the medical background, if any, and Data, Troi and Picard had come straight from the bridge. It was the Captain who started.

"I've called this meeting to discuss any other aspects of this mission that we've missed or ought to look for. Mr Data, would you like to begin?"

Data nodded and addressed the members of the meeting. "As you are no doubt aware, Balton III is in the middle of a trade war which has been the product of a political opposition. The two governments that make up the planet's political structure have been against each other as far back as records can go."

"How did it start?" asked Pulaski.

"I am afraid that information is unavailable. However it is known that it is leading to an all-out war, and it is imperative that the situation be corrected."

It was Geordi's turn to ask, "Why the ever so big security? The only one who usually gets this sort of thing is the Federation President."

"Because," answered Worf, "each side does not want the other to gain supremacy. It will be seen as a one sided fight if we insist that the conference be held in either territory. They will send assassins, terrorists, anything, to undo the peace talks. It IS THAT critical."

"So neutral ground," continued Data, "is the prime ingredient for these talks. We have selected an island that is in the ocean midway between the two landmasses."

Picard was leaning on the arm of his chair, hand on the side of his face, index finger running along the line of his mouth. He pointed to La Forge with the same finger.

"Technology. What are they capable of?"

"Their space craft are at the level of 20th century Terran technology, so we won't be attacked by any of their ships. Because of these gaps they've enlisted the aid of others."

"And in this case any who'll help fuel their fight against the other," replied Riker. A thought flashed through his mind. "Romulans? Ferengi?"

"No. Not for the Baltonians," replied Picard. This caused a surprised look from everyone, which made the Captain feel uncomfortable and give an explanation for his statement. "It's just not their style." He turned to Pulaski. "What are they capable of if war did break out?"

Pulaski's face was stern and her voice direct. "Apart from their conventional weapons, which are terrifying enough, they are also able to use chemical and bacteriological weapons. They range from mustard gas to Xeniba."

"Xeniba?!! What's that? I've never heard..." Wesley's voice trembled with fear. That last word SOUNDED deadly.

"Xeniba is death's nightmare. It's a living organism that literally eats everything in sight that is alive. And the horrific thing is if you drop this in a desert it would stay dormant. But if you walked over it..." She shook her head slowly.

"Doesn't it die at all?" Geordi's voice broke the deafening silence that followed Pulaski's explanation.

"Yes," she nodded. She paused. "Eventually."

Wesley raised his hand. Picard pointed to him to cue his question. "Will they fire on us?"

It was Data who answered. "It is uncertain that they will, but the possibility is still open. They still *can* fire on us"

The intercom bleeped. Picard answered it as if they had been talking about old times. "This is Picard. What is it?"

"We've Starbase 162 on visual. We are ten minutes to final docking."

"Go to impulse power. Picard out."

He turned to the meeting. "Is there anything further?" His eyes went from person to person. When no-one answered, he smiled, "The meeting is concluded. You're dismissed."

The huge outer doors of the space station parted slowly to allow the graceful shape of the Enterprise to enter. As they slid into the docking bay, Transporter Chief O'Brien stood ready behind the transporter console. The base was full and unfortunately a malfunction in the docking umbilical caused the link-up to be abandoned. The ambassadors would have to beam aboard.

Riker and Worf entered the transporter room. But it was Riker who was uneasy, not Worf.

"How long are they going to be? They said a couple of minutes."

"You know diplomats, sir. They say one thing and mean another," O'Brien grinned at his remark. Riker shot him an acid look. O'Brien quickly lost his smile.

The doors opened again and Captain Picard entered wearing his ceremonial jacket. It was similar to his standard uniform and it hung down just below his knees. "Anything yet about our guests, Mr O'Brien?" quipped Picard. (*How the hell does he do it, sound so patient?* thought Riker.)

"No sir, not yet - " His console suddenly bleeped. "Wait," he said quickly. "We're being signalled. They're ready to come aboard."

"At last," sighed Riker.

Picard noticed Worf fingering his collar. Obviously he didn't like wearing a ceremonial jacket either. When Worf saw the Captain looking at him, he replaced his hand at his side. "I'm sorry, sir. It's the collar, it's rather annoying."

Picard nodded understandingly. Riker gave a small smile.

"I know what you mean. I had to fiddle with my jacket for a while before it was comfortable."

"Energizing, sir," reported O'Brien.

The room filled with the familiar hum of power. Two shapes appeared on the pads, glistening. As the sparkles faded, the shapes became the form of two men.

"Welcome aboard the Enterprise," said Picard, stepping forward. "I'm Captain Jean-Luc Picard, this is my First Officer, Commander William Riker, Chief of Security, Lt Worf."

"Thank you. I'm Ambassador Dextan and this is my aide, Mr Melanby."

Melanby looked nervously at Worf as they stepped off the transporter pad.

"My pleasure to meet you. Commander Riker will show you to your quarters. Gentlemen?"

He showed them the way to the door. As they moved on Riker noticed Melanby keeping a distance from Worf. "Don't worry," whispered Riker to Melanby, "He is as tame as a kitten." He was glad the Klingon didn't hear his sarcastic remark, and quickly realised the full meaning of life to him. He let out a silent sigh of relief. Melanby still kept his distance.

As Riker led the party from the room and along the corridors, something kept bugging him; some niggling little doubt about the diplomats. He didn't know Dextan all that well, just what he was able to accomplish. But the thought kept hitting him. Wasn't Dextan, according to those old reports, OLDER?

CHAPTER II

As the Enterprise pulled away from its bay, the exterior lights on the docking umbilical came on. The fault had been repaired. *Impeccable timing*, thought Troi. Just like Starfleet to fix the barn doors after the horse has come home. Picard and Worf entered the Bridge minus Riker, who was showing the guests to their quarters. Although the journey would only take a couple of days at warp speed the two VIP passengers would have time to work out a strategy for the situation.

Worf proceeded to his security station and the Captain to his chair. But he didn't sit down. Instead he turned to his Security Chief. "Mr Worf, may I see you in my Ready Room?"

Worf had just enough time to sign in on duty and now he had to sign off. Another officer took over for him during his absence. Picard was standing at his door, to allow Worf to enter first. As the doors closed behind the two men, Data, who had been watching this from his station, cocked his head in a curious fashion. It wasn't every day your Captain took the Security Chief aside.

Wesley entered the Bridge from the turbolift across from Picard's Ready Room. He crossed over to the Con station and took control of the instruments.

"Where's the Captain?" asked the enquiring Ensign.

"He's in his Ready Room with Lt Worf," replied Data.

"Why? What's wrong?" asked Wesley with a puzzled look.

"I do not know, Wesley. But the Captain did look rather concerned."

Now there's an entry for your diary, thought Wesley.

Worf approached the Captain's desk and stood, legs apart, arms behind his back, elbows out. Picard came from behind and sat at his desk.

"Please sit down," he invited Worf in a pleasant manner. He indicated to the Klingon to do so. Worf took up Picard's offer, reluctantly though. "You've been acting Chief of Security for some time now, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I seem to remember from an early report from Lt Yar... " (there seemed to be a flash of sadness in Worf's eyes for a moment - was there?) ... "that you be recommended for Command of Security eventually."

"Sir." Worf had no idea what Picard was leading up to. Was it something he had done?

"Is there something wrong, Lieutenant? During the welcoming of Ambassador Dextan you seemed..." a pause... "withdrawn."

Worf gave a look of realisation. Someone had noticed.

Picard continued. "Your performance over the last three days is, to say the least, rather doubtful. These extra duties you've given yourself are burning you out, Lieutenant."

"But, sir - "

"Dr Pulaski agrees. You are off duty for the next three days for plenty of rest."

"But, sir," protested Worf, rising to his feet, "the situation on Balton III, the ship - "

"I think we can handle all that without you for the time being," answered Picard.

There was no use in debating it. The Captain had just ordered him to have some R and R. "Will that be all, sir?" asked Worf.

"Yes."

He turned and left Picard in the room. He headed towards the horseshoe shaped console. The young man who had been manning the station was ready to relinquish command, but Worf had a few words with him. He nodded. Troi had been watching. Data had been watching. Wesley had been watching. Worf turned to the turbolift. When the doors opened, he stepped inside and the doors closed again. By this time everyone was bemused by this. Wesley was the first to find his voice.

"WELL, what was THAT all about?"

Troi crossed over to him and rested her arm on the back of Data's chair.

"Disappointment. From Worf."

"From a Klingon?" asked Wesley.

"Yes," replied Data. "It is possible. A study of Klingon behaviour by Dr Hans Gettering showed that when certain circumstances, dictated by certain events - "

"Data!" called Troi. The android fell silent like a little boy told to be quiet.

"What I was saying was that he is upset about something," continued Troi.

"I wonder what it was that upset him," replied Wesley.

"I don't know," answered Troi. "But I think it's for the best that he leave for a while."

Riker felt like a hotel boy, with his, "Here's the bedrooms," and, "Here's the shower" - and that doubt of his was still in his head. But he decided to keep it quiet for now. After all, that would be like asking the cat burglar, "Are you a thief?"

Dextan and Melanby were dumbstruck by the luxury that they were given. "And we are in communication with the bridge and the Captain?" asked Dextan politely.

"At all times, when needed," he replied.

Melanby stepped forward, "Excuse me, but your Security Chief's a... Klingon?"

Riker grinned. But not all the way through. "Yes. But I thought you that already?"

"Er - All I knew was that the Enterprise was our mode of transport," answered Melanby. "Nothing more."

"I see," said Riker, nodding his head.

At that moment there was a slight jolt, a soft but sudden thrust. From the window the stars flashed first as a blur and then as the familiar warp 'star-streak' effect. Riker remembered the first time he had seen the warp field from within. As a cadet he was frankly fascinated.

"If you'll excuse me please. I've duties to attend to. If you need anything ..."

"Thank you, Commander."

The First Officer turned and left the room. He didn't see Dextan give the door an acid stare.

Worf, in a mood of depression, locked his quarters' doors. He was mad. At himself. Being sent off duty! It wasn't as if there was anything wrong with his well being. He just hoped that Picard wouldn't use the turbolift that he had - the one with the holes and dent on the inside. He made his way towards his bed and collapsed onto it. He gave a deep breath and relaxed. Maybe the rest would do him the world of good. Worf closed his eyes. Afterwards a really good work-out...

The Enterprise continued its journey to Balton III at warp speed. On her bridge, the feeling was tense. The urgency of their arrival was critical. Picard tapped the top of the arm of his chair. It was beginning to annoy Troi.

"You're tense, Captain."

Picard immediately stopped tapping and turned his head to his councillor. "I'm going over what we'll probably expect."

"Yes. I sense your anxiousness."

"It's a case of wondering if the Baltonians are wanting peace. If not we'll be a floating target."

Troi was stunned, "But La Forge said..."

"Twentieth Century level, yes. But Starfleet intelligence can be mistaken. When it comes to wars and I've to be piggy in the middle..."

"The what...?" There was a giggle in her voice. She just couldn't help it.

"It is an old Earth expression. It refers to a third party."

Troi gave a silent, "Ah."

At that moment, there was a beep at Data's panel. "Sir, we are receiving an urgent message from Starbase 162."

"On screen."

Data tapped his console twice and the streaks of light that were stars were replaced by the image of a man slightly older than Picard and wearing the uniform of an Admiral. Picard instantly recognised the man he was facing. "Admiral Contararis, this is Captain Picard of the Enterprise. What's the reason for this call?"

Contararis' face was grim and stormy, as was his voice. "War has been declared on Balton III. Starfleet Command is in two minds whether to continue the mission. But in the end they decided that you must get there. At *ALL* costs."

Everyone on the bridge had the same look - a look of shock as if someone had slapped them in the face. It was Picard who managed to recover first. "We understand the situation. We'll do everything in our power to get there."

The older man nodded. "For all our sakes. For their sakes."

The screen returned to its familiar star pattern.

"Mr Data," announced Picard, "Warp 9."

"Aye, sir."

"Engineering. This is Picard."

"Lt La Forge here, sir."

"We'll be going to maximum warp. How much can you give us?"

La Forge smiled at his com panel. "How much do you need?"

The Enterprise streaked forward even faster than before; the crew more anxious than

ever.

"Mr Crusher, what's our new ETA?"

Wesley paused awhile and then answered. "Thirty hours, sir."

Picard groaned to himself. A day less to prepare for the entrance to Armageddon. *God*, he thought. *Even Hell couldn't be this bad.*

Worf had slept for about an hour and then decided he couldn't really stay idle for long. His form, in his opinion, was a lot less than he desired. A work-out within his quarters seemed acceptable. He had read of an old form of Klingon 'martial art' called K'targ'ol. In some ways it was similar to ancient Samurai. He'd studied some of the finer points and decided that if he were to stay alert, this would at the very least, help him to do so. He crossed the room towards a wall safe and keyed in the opening sequence. The door opened and revealed a large wooden chest. Worf removed the box, placed it on a table and opened it. He then took out the contents - a sword shaped like a machete, only longer. The Security Chief smiled at the sharpened edge.

'Dextan' fumed at 'Melanby', savagely rounding on him. "Did you *have* to be so nervous?"

'Melanby' quickly retaliated to the remark. "How the hell was I to know there would be a Klingon? As a Chief of Security at that!?"

'Dextan' growled at that. "I thought the briefing was better than that. *Expect the unexpected.* Besides, it was said to be a possibility. Look, do they suspect us? No. Have they challenged us? No."

'Melanby' nodded. "You're right. I'll..." The intercom suddenly beeped. "Damn!" he cursed.

Picard's voice came over. "Ambassador, we've moved to maximum warp. War has been declared. The situation is critical."

"Understood, Captain." The intercom closed down.

'Melanby' stepped forward. "Well - what's the plan?"

'Dextan' sat on the sofa and invited 'Melanby' to do the same. "First when we go on that invited tour of the ship, make sure we go to, or rather one of us goes to the engine room. We then plant the bomb *on* the intermix chamber. At some point we'll escape using either a shuttle or escape life boat."

"Have you got the timer?" asked 'Melanby'. 'Dextan' nodded.

'Melanby' suddenly panicked. "Explosives! We haven't any explosives."

'Dextan' chuckled, "Don't worry. You can make a bomb out of everyday household

chemicals. It's not the first time I've done it."

"Do you think they'll find the bodies of the *real* ambassadors?" 'Melanby' sounded concerned.

"If they do it will be too late."

"The girl...?"

"A witness. It was necessary to terminate her. We've spent too long planning this. There must be no error." 'Dextan's voice was powerful and terrifying. 'Melanby' gulped. "Besides," he continued. "I've never seen a Starship explode before."

As the Enterprise continued on her mercy mission, the situation on Balton III was getting worse. Hostilities had broken out and the violence was increasing, something that made Picard think seriously about the safety of everyone concerned.

He was sitting in his Ready Room, reviewing the data that was already available. He hadn't slept well that night. Too much worrying. And he told Worf to relax! Speaking of which he wondered...

Worf, on the other hand, *DID* sleep well. He had spent the previous night practising K'targ'ol, cuts, thrusts and all the other basic disciplines. He had only been interrupted once and that had been by La Forge looking in to see how he was. Worf had eaten, washed and dressed. He had allowed himself a lie-in - just following orders, after all. *But don't make it a habit*, he reminded himself. He continued his swordsmanship to burn up the last of that negative energy.

BEEEP

Damn! thought Picard. "Come."

The doors parted to reveal Commander Riker, waiting patiently.

"Yes? What is it, Number One?"

Riker entered the room and approached the Captain's desk somewhat hesitantly. *Odd*, thought Picard. *Something must be wrong if Riker doesn't come to me straight.*

"It's about the ambassadors."

"Oh no, not again," groaned Picard.

"Sir?"

"Oh, nothing, Number One. I think everyone has something to say about the ambassadors."

Riker gave a silent, *Oh*.

"Anyway, what was it you wanted?"

"Well, sir," replied the First Officer bashfully, "it's been on my mind for some time now. A small niggling doubt keeps cropping up." Riker gave a brief pause and Picard encouraged him to continue with raised eyebrows. "I don't think the ambassadors are who they say they are, sir."

"What?" breathed Picard. "Do you have any idea what you're saying?" He rose and stood in front of his desk.

"I do, sir. Shall I continue?"

La Forge felt honoured. A dignitary visiting his engine room. He took great pride in explaining the various sections.

"Ambassador Dextan, as you can see, this monitors the..." He turned to see 'Dextan' staring at the massive illuminated column at the far end of the room.

"What's that?" he asked.

"That, sir, is the heart of the whole system," replied La Forge. "That's the dilithium crystal chamber. The matter and anti-matter particles are detonated in there at the crystals in the middle."

"How are they guided?"

"There's a series of electromagnets that keep the particles dead centre of the inlet connectors."

"What if - er - there was nothing there. I mean no magnets, no connectors?"

La Forge gave a worried glance at 'Dextan'. "With the matter, it could be like a series of bullets hitting the side but it can stand high velocity impacts; but anti-matter..." He shook his head. "If that goes, I don't want to be here when it does."

"Can I have a closer look at it?" asked 'Dextan' innocently.

"Why not? But mind you don't slip over the bannister. I've just got something to check."

He turned his back on the chamber as 'Dextan' walked around the column. When he reached the rear of it, he pulled out a small package from under his tunic. He examined it briefly and attached it to the metal band in the centre. The box was held by magnets. The ambassador pressed a couple of contact panels and walked around the other side.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Your tour was most enlightening."

La Forge waved from his panel. "Pleasure having you, sir."

'Dextan' turned towards the turbolift with an evil smile. No-one saw him place the box on the chamber. No-one knew that the box was a bomb.

CHAPTER III

Worf's door buzzer beeped. He let himself pretend he didn't hear it. Again it beeped. This time he had to answer it.

"Come," he growled. He didn't like being interrupted. The doors parted to reveal a young Ensign about Wesley's age, give or take a year or two.

"May I enter?" he asked nervously.

"You may," answered Worf.

The Ensign entered slowly. The doors closed behind him.

"Can I help you?" continued Worf.

"Yes, I think you can," stammered the Ensign. He paused a while and then replied, "I'm afraid to die."

"Die!?" asked Worf. The remark had caught him unawares.

"I've heard a lot about people dying in the Federation, and basically... I'm scared," replied the Ensign.

Worf ushered the Ensign over to the sofa. Once they both sat down and made themselves comfortable, it was Worf who continued.

"What is your name, Ensign?" he asked quizzically.

"Mark Fletcher."

"What exactly is it that frightens you, and why come to me?"

"Well," replied Mark, not quite knowing where to start. "It's just that I don't want to die."

Worf considered what he was going to say. The boy *was* terrified and it was going to take a few choice words.

Picard sat back listening intently to Riker explaining his suspicions about Dextan. "I know it's pretty silly but something doesn't quite ring true with me. It's Ambassador Dextan..."

"Mmmm," murmured Picard.

Riker wasn't sure what that 'Mmmm' was meant to mean, but he carried on undeterred. "Did Starfleet send any information on the diplomats?"

Picard thought for a while. "No, only the basics about him; facts, no pictures, but..." He suddenly stopped himself. "Why the Hell are you asking? What's going on here?"

Riker looked uncomfortable but managed to compose himself a moment later. "I don't think he's who he claims to be. I think we've got a couple of intruders on board."

"What!?" stammered Picard. "Have you any idea what you're saying? Starfleet has given Dextan and his aide *FULL* ambassadorial status."

"Yes, I know," replied Riker in a tone that sounded of defeat. A hunch wasn't much against cold facts. Picard looked hard at his First Officer. Riker wasn't usually wrong - certainly not with matters like this.

"All right, Will," said Picard leaning on one arm of his chair. "Have Councillor Troi have a - er - conversation with our two guests. I'll contact Starbase 162 for more information."

Riker smiled. "Shall I put Worf on to it as well?"

But Picard was more serious. "Only when it becomes necessary, and only then."

Worf listened to Fletcher's confession. Not just a wariness of death, but an absolute fear of it. And that in itself was not healthy.

"... and I thought that coming to you, with you being a Klingon and all, you might be able to help. You know, honour and dying with dignity and stuff like that."

Well, that was quite a build up. But how do you follow that up? "Have you seen Councillor Troi?" asked Worf.

"Well... er... NO. I haven't," stammered Fletcher.

"Why? She might have given you help far better than I could," replied Worf.

"I wanted to know how a Klingon might think. I thought that it might help..."

"I see. Well, death comes to us all. Sooner or later, it will come." Worf shifted on the sofa to reassess his point. "Humans; some of them see death as the final action in a life. But a Klingon sees it as a continuation. Death is only a phase, but the life continues in another form. There is no interruption, save for the action of death."

"But I'm scared of dying," exclaimed Fletcher.

"Why?"

"Because..." Fletcher stopped. "Because..."

Worf tilted his head slightly. "Yes...?"

But Fletcher had to concede defeat. His argument had no strength against Worf's stout belief.

"I still fear death, Lieutenant," continued Fletcher. "But now I think I see it from a different angle. Thank you."

Worf smiled (an extremely self-satisfied smug smile). "As long as you have a deep and respectful understanding of death, there will be no need to fear it." Worf rose from the sofa and crossed the room to the food replicator. "Would you like a drink, Ensign?" he asked. And

the young man could not refuse such a generous offer.

Geordi scratched his head in frustration. All the sensors, all the instruments, said everything was working perfectly, but yet the readings were the same; there was a small fluctuation in the magnetic fields around the dilithium crystals. Nothing potentially dangerous. But it was confusing.

He checked the computer; he double-checked the computer. No, it was the same as before. *Now what on earth could be causing that?* he wondered.

And as he wondered, the bomb continued its count-down to the inevitable conclusion.

The two 'ambassadors' sat in their quarters planning their next move. They were totally unaware of the conversation that had just taken place between Riker and Picard. 'Dextan', looking more confident than ever, spoke, sounding like a madman from old stereotype mad scientist movies. Only more confident, of course.

"Connor, my friend, soon your worries will be over. The bomb is now in place and soon it will be bye-bye Federation Starship. And we will be able to return as heroes!"

But Connor was not impressed by the grand speech. Even though he had taken Melanby's place and even though nobody suspected them and though they were cheerfully welcomed aboard, the friendliness still didn't assure him enough. And the Klingon...

"But Alvar, I don't like it. It's going *too* well. And that Klingon, he'll suspect us. We've got to get out *NOW!!!*"

Connor paced the room at a frantic pace. Occasionally he would stop, tap his finger on the edge of the table and continue his fretting.

It was at that moment that the quarters' buzzer sounded.

Damn, thought Connor. *Someone's here.* He quickly turned his eyes to the easy chair where he had hidden a switchblade dagger under the cushions.

"Come," called Alvar.

The doors revealed Deanna Troi as she stepped in.

"Ah, come in my dear. What an unexpected surprise," said Alvar, so courteously.

"Thank you," replied Troi as she stepped in.

"And to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?" asked Alvar.

Connor stayed stony silent.

"Well I was - er - passing and I thought - "

"You would visit us. How charming," said Alvar.

A smooth talker, anyway, thought Deanna. She only hoped she could smooth-talk her way through this one. Captain Picard had asked her to visit the men everyone was calling Dextan and Melanby, two of the Federations finest ambassadors, sent to help quell the war now raging on Balton III. Riker had warned her to be careful. But Connor, something about him worried her - .

"Please sit down," beckoned Alvar.

"Thank you, Ambassador." She went to sit down in the chair with the hidden dagger.

"No, not that one," screamed Connor.

They both turned to Connor who suddenly realised what he had said. "I - I mean please sit here. I-It's more - comfortable."

Deanna was suspicious but hid it well. Cautiously she accepted Connor's invitation. "Well, if you insist, Ambassador," she replied.

She left the chair, crossed over to another chair as shown by Connor, and sat.. She was tempted to leave her communicator turned on, but if they had listening devices, she would be discovered. "I wondered how your preparations were going," she mused.

"Quite well, actually," snapped Connor rather promptly.

TOO promptly, thought Deanna.

"What my colleague means is that we have devised a strategy for peace. And we believe it will work," said Alvar, stepping in.

"So soon?" answered Deanna rather startled. "How did you - ?"

"We actually started forming a premise as soon as soon as we heard," continued Alvar sitting down next to Troi. "With every update, we simply changed the format."

"What is the plan? I really would like to hear it. Captain Picard would like to know as well."

A very long silence followed. Deanna sensed a rather uncomfortable 'shifting'; an obvious sign of nervousness.

"We can't explain," Alvar said quickly (panicky, Troi noted,) "but suffice to say we set up a very complex set of conditions that would best serve the Baltonians."

"I see," said Troi quietly. Riker's hunch was right. They weren't who they said they were. Now she had to get out of there without rousing them. That would be dangerous, even fatal.

Riker and Picard had just left the ready room when Data turned in his chair. "Sir, message coming in from Starbase 162. Priority One."

"Data, did they say what it was about?" queried Riker.

"No, Commander. But they did say that it was vital for Captain Picard to receive it," answered Data. His tone was calm and informative, as always.

"On screen," demanded Picard.

The streaking stars were replaced by the face of Admiral Contararis. A grim and more serious expression had replaced his usual welcoming smile. Before Picard could say anything else it was Contararis who began. "Thank God you're still here."

The remark puzzled everyone on the bridge. What kind of remark was that?

"Admiral, you issued a Priority One signal. Now I want to know WHY!" Picard was trying to make sense of all this. But none of it did.

"Picard, it's our belief that you have two terrorists aboard the Enterprise. The real ambassadors are dead."

"Dead?" asked Picard as if someone had slapped him in the face.

"We found their bodies in the temporary quarters where they were staying until the Enterprise received them. They'd been stabbed. And we know who did it," said Contararis, grimly.

"The men we have aboard," said Riker filling in the pieces all too well.

"Their names are Alvar and Connor. They're part of the PLF, the Planetary Liberation Front. They're against the Federation in everything it undertakes. One of its aims is to destroy Starfleet," answered Contararis.

"You make it sound as if they were going to destroy the Enterprise," said Riker with a cold fear.

"They will. We know they've targeted your ship. Why now?" Contararis' thoughts had turned to the Baltonians. "Captain," the Admiral warned, "These men are dangerous. I advise you to protect your ship at all costs. Good luck."

Suddenly a look of horror sprang across Riker's face. "Deanna! She's with them right now."

Geordi was fuming now. He couldn't understand what the cause was. *Maybe I'm missing something*, he thought. He began to stroll around the chamber. And then he saw it. A package fixed to the central girth itself by the smaller magnets. Quickly he scanned it with his visor. Good, no trembler switch. Immediately he grabbed and ran to the front of the intermix. There were only SECONDS to go.

"Everything, clear engineering. NOW!!!" he screamed.

People didn't need telling twice. They ran in all directions to the various exits.

La Forge quickly checked the timer again. No time to beam it into space. With all his strength he threw it over the master systems display in the centre of the room. It bounced off the master systems monitor - and then exploded. The force of the blast hurled La Forge to the

floor. Pieces of plexiglass and mechanisms flew out over the room. When he looked where the screen used to be, a large gaping hole now sat lit with flames from within. He allowed himself to breath out with one word riding on it. "Damn... "

"Fire alert! Fire alert! Deck 36. Engineering," called the computer.

"La Forge, are you all right?" called Picard via his communicator. No response. "Lt La Forge, are you all right?" he called again.

This time a voice came over; rather groggily though. "This is La Forge."

"Geordi, what the Hell happened?" It was Riker's turn to ask.

"We had a bomb on the dilithium chamber. If we hadn't discovered it we would have gone up like a fourth of July firework."

"Damage report," asked Picard.

"Some structural damage I would say. Nothing else."

"What about Worf? Shall I get him?" snapped Riker.

"We may need him. Make it so," replied Picard.

The ship went to Red Alert immediately. Dr Pulaski's trauma team was at Engineering tending to those caught in the blast. Fortunately, the injuries were not severe; mostly shock. The rest were cuts and bruises. Pulaski herself gave La Forge a once over with her tricorder.

"But I'm fine," he repeated stubbornly as he rubbed his aching neck.

"No, there's nothing wrong with you... and Data was embarrassed when he ripped off the seat of his pants," she said sarcastically.

"Doctor - " snarled La Forge, but a look from Pulaski quickly silenced him.

The klaxons rang in the corridor outside the guest quarters where Deanna Troi sat with the two men impersonating two ambassadors. It was Connor who became startled.

"W-what's going on?" Why is this happening?" he spluttered.

"I'm not sure. I'll call the bridge," replied Deanna.

But before she could reach her communicator, Alvar had already snatched the switchblade from its hiding place, and pointed at Troi. His voice was impeccably calm. "No. I don't think so, my dear. You're not going to warn them of us."

Troi gulped. Her feelings were correct. But an escape would have made them suspicious and could have caused even more trouble.

"Warn? What do you mean?" she bluffed.

"I think you know that. But you won't prevent our escape."

"Really? How are you going to escape? You'll never get off the ship," she said resolutely.

Alvar smiled an evil leer in Troi's direction. "That doesn't matter now. We can retreat, regroup and attack again. And then... As they say 'If at first you don't succeed, try try again'."

Connor silently crept up behind Troi without her knowing it. After all her attention was focused on Alvar. However at the last second, she sensed his intent. Almost instinctively, she jumped up, spun round, hooked her foot behind Connor's leg and pulled sharply. Connor fell with a sickening thud. It was then Troi took her chance. Alvar still had the knife but he didn't have it pointed at her. She took advantage of her adversary's moment of indecision. As she ran to the door she punched Alvar in the stomach - hard. Alvar dropped the switchblade but before the wind left him, he delivered a karate-style chop to the back of Troi's neck. She went down as if someone had pulled out her plug.

"Damn," said Connor. "She's going to blow this sky high."

"They probably already know. Can't you hear that noise? They use it for alert status," snapped Alvar.

"Shall I kill her?" asked Connor in a perverted fashion.

"No. We don't have time," gasped Alvar. "We'll have to split up, but we'll meet up at Keltor 9 as planned."

"But we need phasers," realised Connor, now picking himself up from the floor.

"Don't worry," said Alvar calmly. "If they have security out there I'm sure they'd gladly oblige us a couple."

"Lt Worf," chirped Worf's communicator.

"Aye sir," he replied.

"We have two known terrorists aboard, and we can't make contact with Counselor Troi. She was last with the ambassadors in their quarters." It was Riker who spoke, but with a slight panic in his voice.

"On my way," he replied.

Fletcher rose as well. "I'd better get to my post. It's on Deck 6." Worf acknowledged with a nod. The two rose and left the quarters. They had heard the klaxons and Worf was just about to call the bridge when Riker came through. "Security team to Ambassadorial quarters," he called into his communicator.

"Team 3 here, sir," was the reply. "Counselor Troi is unconscious but Dr Pulaski is here tending here."

"The ambassadors?" questioned Worf.

"They've gone, sir."

Worf checked his phaser. He'd picked it up as he left his quarters. It was fully charged and ready.

They'd only walked a few yards when Worf's communicator chirped again. Riker's voice filtered through. "Worf, two guards are dead and their phasers stolen. They're armed and potentially dangerous." He paused. "Be careful."

"Understood," replied Worf.

Suddenly a figure came running down the corridor towards them, instantly halting before them. It was Connor. And he was armed.

"Klingon!" he screamed as he aimed the phaser at Worf.

Worf had just grasped his weapon when Connor fired.

"NO!!!" yelled Fletcher.

The ensign pushed the Klingon to one side removing one target but in doing so replaced it with another. Himself. The beam hit him full on the chest, throwing him a distance backward. Connor fired towards Worf again, but missed as Worf hurled himself into a forward roll. He arrived at his original position in a crouched position.

He fired, and the difference was that he didn't miss. Connor screamed as the beam hit, and vanished.

Worf quickly set the phaser from disintegrate to neutral and scrambled to Fletcher's side.

"W - Worf," he said weakly. "Am I going... t-to live?"

"Medical emergency, corridor 9. Am coming to sickbay with an injured man. Prepare to receive," he called to his communicator.

Pulaski had returned to the medical centre, exhausted. Engineers, Counselor Troi. She turned to her assistant as she tended the wounded.

"It's hard to imagine, but I joined the Enterprise because I thought it would be quiet and not like the Third World War," she said. The assistant smiled but he was unsure if Pulaski was being funny or her usual sarcastic self. The doors parted and in stormed Worf with Fletcher limp in his arms.

"What the - " gasped Pulaski, pulling out her tricorder as she approached the table.

"He was shot by one of the ambas - the murderers," he said grimly.

Within seconds, Pulaski and her team had Fletcher hooked up to vital life-support. Like ants they swarmed over the boy trying to save his life. For long minutes they worked hard. Then Pulaski left, to go to Worf. Her expression was one of despair.

"Worf - I don't think he's going to make it."

Worf stared at her, but somehow he seemed to accept it.

"Worf," she continued. "What happened to the murderer?"

"Dead," he said flatly.

"Where's the body?"

She couldn't explain why he walked away from her.

Sickbay's doors opened again, this time admitting a Security contingent. Amongst them was a man who looked as if he'd just fought a war - and lost. Worf instantly recognised the man. It was Alvar.

"He was headed for shuttlebay 2. It took all us to hold him. We brought him here for treatment," said one of the guards.

"Good," replied Worf.

He approached the man and stood in front of him. Since the guards had him completely surrounded, he couldn't get far if he tried to escape.

"What was your mission?" barked Worf.

No reply.

"Who is your leader?"

Again no reply.

"Why are you here?"

This time Alvar looked at Worf, and smiled limply. "You know, Klingon, as a race I respect your people. I really do. But as a person, I hope you rot in Hell."

Worf was unaffected by the insult.

"You'll be taken to High Security for further questioning," he said sternly.

"Maybe," answered Alvar. "But you'll never find anything."

It happened in a second. Alvar reached into his pocket, pulled out a hypo-spray and injected himself.

"Stop him!" someone yelled.

For a moment, Alvar was calm. Then suddenly he jerked. He yelled, laughed, then hurled himself at Worf and put his hands around the Klingon's throat. But the grip never tightened. Instead his hands fell at almost the same time he made his attack. Then he collapsed and lay still.

Pulaski ran over and ran a scan over Alvar.

Her look said it all. He was dead. Curiously she took her tricorder to the hypo as it lay

on the floor.

"Tricordrazine. He just gave himself one hundred times the normal doze in one go. A concentration like that is fatal." Her tone was cold and harsh.

Fletcher. Worf ran to the boy. His vital signs were fading.

"Worf - " whispered Mark. "I'm... dying..."

"Don't speak," pleaded Worf.

"How... How did I-I do - ?"

The boy was close to death and nothing could prevent it. "You saved my life," replied Worf. "Only warrior has courage to do such a deed. Today a warrior has been born." He bent closer to the boy, and held his hand. "And this is truly a mighty warrior."

"Thank you - warrior," gasped Mark as he breathed his last.

As Pulaski respectfully pulled the sheet over the boy's face, Worf felt a helplessness and an uncontrollable anger towards these killers. He left sadly, slowly.

Pulaski watched as she saw him leave. And a single thought entered her mind. The hard man *DID* have a heart after all.

EPILOGUE

Two weeks later the Enterprise returned to Earth. The mission to Balton III was unsuccessful; Picard was forbidden to continue the mission - he did not have ambassadorial status. And it was felt that if a Starship Captain tried to negotiate with the warring factions, either side would see it as a powerful force trying to sway power from the other. The last report said that the situation had become so bad neither side was willing to negotiate.

Fletcher's funeral was a burial as requested by Mark's family; a simple family affair with Picard, Riker and Worf in attendance. When they asked Worf how he had died, he simply said, "Bravely, with fine courage." Somehow it seemed to help - not much, but nevertheless it helped.

As the cortege split up eventually, Riker turned to find Worf was no longer with them.

"Captain, have you seen Worf anywhere?" he asked.

"Over there," replied Picard.

He pointed back at the grave. There, still standing, was Worf. Riker turned to fetch the officer but Picard stopped him.

"No, Will. Leave him. Let him have his time. As I understand it, he was quite close to Ensign Fletcher. He can follow us later - when he's ready." Picard tapped his communicator.

"Mr O'Brien, two to beam up. Mr Worf will be joining us later."

Worf didn't hear the transporter beam. If he did, he didn't care. He stared at the

gravestone and the words inscribed onto it.

'The Lost Spirit Of Thee Shall Find The Grace Of God'.

Worf didn't understand Terran religion. But somehow the words seemed respectful. He contemplated the last words he spoke to Mark; 'Today a warrior has been born.' Tragic for such a loss of life. On the Enterprise. On Balton III. For Mark Fletcher.

But despite the grief that seemed to dwell in Worf, he was pleased. Pleased by the fact that a small boy finally found the courage to become a man.

